

# IDLER



THE ART OF LIVING • JULY–AUGUST 2020

## BACK TO THE LAND

Lessons in self-sufficiency

ARMANDO IANNUCCI

“The last 30 years has been  
an enormous skive”

ROMAN HOLIDAY

Leisure in the  
ancient world

THE NEW SLOW

Towards a sane economy

BRING BACK  
BOWING

says Marcel  
Theroux

*PLUS*

Stewart Lee's music column,  
sheds, philosophy and football

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# IDLER

THE ART OF LIVING · JULY–AUGUST 2020

*libertas per cultum*

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NO. 73





# Contents

*Idler* No.73, July–August 2020



## NOTES FROM THE COUCH

Readers' Letters	8
Idler's Diary	12
Modern Toss	11, 33
Slow tech Harry R Lloyd becomes the virtual Bruce Lee	18
How I live Mr Sean Laverick: NHS surgeon	20
Pete Penny: shelf stacker	24
Problems with Virginia Ironside	28
The Good Stuff Annabel Sampson and Charlotte Brook are game for some savoury snacks and a night on the tiles	32
Poetry with John Moore	36

## FEATURES

Interview: Masters of merriment Armando Iannucci, Sally Phillips and John Lloyd have a drink with the <i>Idler</i>	39
Modern manners Bring back bowing, says Marcel Theroux	51
The productivity trap Andrew Simms assesses the impact of coronavirus on the way we work	53
Roman holiday John Davie on the double-edged sword of leisure time in ancient Rome	61
Summer in the country Tom Hodgkinson makes hay while the sun shines. Plus a July and August almanac	67



## CONTENTS

### IDLE PURSUITS

#### Art flâneur

Tim Richardson gets wired  
for sound 79

#### Idler classics

Henry Eliot on a  
Surrealist masterpiece,  
Leonora Carrington's  
*The Hearing Trumpet* 86

#### Books

Cathleen Mair gets a taste of  
Shanghai, the poetry of nature,  
and the many challenges of  
women's work 90

#### Fashion

Face masks get a make-over 94

#### Music

Sandy Burnett rattles  
his tambourine 98

#### Lee's ear

Stewart Lee's pick of the  
punkie pops 100

#### Idle home

Georgina Williams visits an  
Arts and Crafts treasure on the  
Norfolk coast 105

#### Football

Percy Preston salutes the  
existentialist enigma that is  
Eric Cantona 114

#### Travel

Richard Hammond looks at  
what the new normal might be 118

#### Spirits

Joseph Piercy on the  
murky history of a  
German bombshell 122

#### Beer

Oli Meade's sipping in  
the sun 125

#### Recipe

Nora Meyer's beetroot soup 128

#### Gardening

Graham Burnett's lockdown  
guide to *The Good Life* 130

#### Beekeeping

Bill Anderson on the  
Honeycomb Conjecture 135

#### Snooker

Alex Johnson on the exclusive  
genre of snooker writing 138

#### Sheds

Alex Johnson on George  
Bernard Shaw's man cave 140

#### Eating out

Victoria Hull has a home Hide 144

#### Easy money

Become a seven  
pound millionaire 148

#### Philosophy

Mark Vernon on the power of  
filthy lucre 151

#### Ukulele

Cameron Murray speaks to uke  
prodigy Taimane Gardner 154

#### Idle pets

160



# La Dolce Vita Retreat

with Kamin Mohammadi and Henry Eliot

September 12th – 19th 2020



Spend a week learning about Italian literature and how to live the good life. Our September retreat takes place at Villa Pia, on the border of Tuscany and Umbria.

Kamin Mohammadi is author of *La Bella Figura*. She will run a series of workshops teaching practical ways to live like an Italian. Kamin will also lead our yoga sessions.

Henry Eliot is an author and editor at Penguin Classics. He will survey the entire history of Italian literature, from Rome to the Renaissance, Romanticism to the Risorgimento, Modernism to Post-Modernism.



## ITINERARY

### Saturday 12th

Evening lecture: *Introduction to the themes*

### Sunday 13th

Yoga

Bella Figura masterclass

Lecture: *La Dolce Vita in Virgil and Ovid*

### Monday 14th

Yoga

Trip to San Sepulcro to see Piero della Francesca and Perugino paintings

Optional cooking class

Lecture: *Dante, Boccaccio and Machiavelli*

### Tuesday 15th

Bella Figura masterclass

Walk to Monterchi to Piero's Madonna del Parti

Lecture: *Olive Oil Masterclass and Tasting*

### Wednesday 16th

Yoga

Walk led by local forager with picnic in the chestnut groves

Lecture: *Italian Literature covering Manzoni, Svevo and Calvino*

### Thursday 17th

Yoga

Trip to Anghieri

Visit to a local olive oil press

Evening off

### Friday 18th

Yoga

Optional Truffle hunting

Optional Cooking Class

Sundowner Lecture: *Summary of La Dolce Vita with all tutors*

Feast

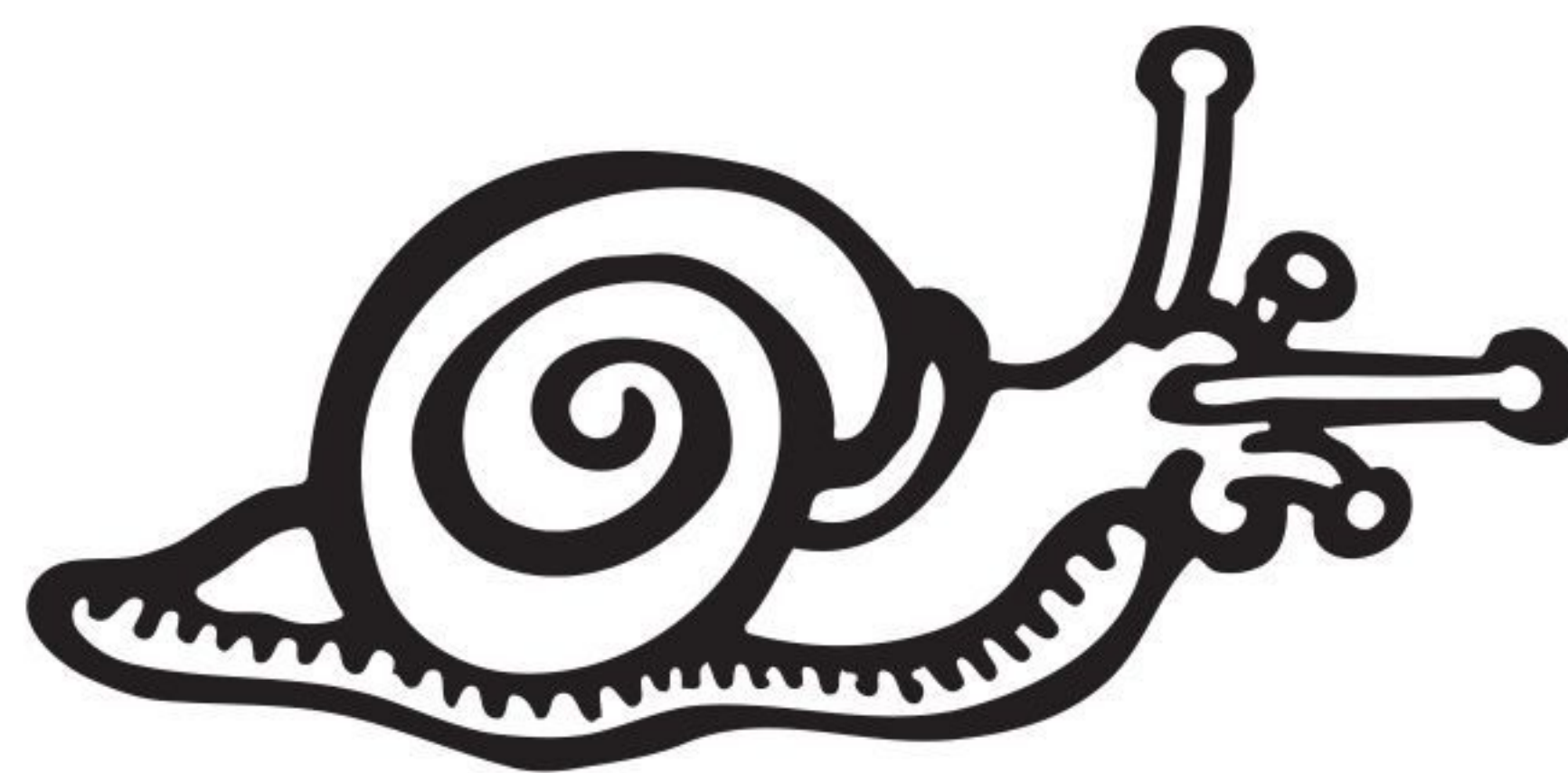
### Saturday 19th

Leave

Prices from £1,199 per person.

For more information go to [idler.co.uk](http://idler.co.uk) or call 0203 176 7907





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# Letter from the Editor

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Dear idlers,

After the sabbatical of lockdown we're not sure whether we want to revert to our bad old ways. Dare we hope that the new world may be a little more idle-friendly than the old one? After all, it's surely the frenetic activity beloved of the system that has led to so many of our problems?

In this issue, economist Andrew Simms outlines a vision of a slower, more civilised economy which is less obsessed by productivity and growth. Former classics don John Davie teaches us about the Roman attitude to leisure, and we revisit my own book *Brave Old World*, an eccentric guide to country living.

We also meet some masters of merriment. One unexpected outcome of quarantine was our Thursday evening "Drink with the *Idler*" virtual event. These have proved to be a great success, and in this issue we offer a few highlights from our drinks with those titans of TV, Armando Iannucci, Sally Phillips and John Lloyd.

I am thrilled to welcome Stewart Lee as our new music columnist, and Lindsey Bareham as the new idle cook. Plus there's our new personal finance column, Easy Money, which will dispense expert advice on money matters.

Many thanks for your letters and for supporting the magazine and academy. While lockdown completely destroyed our sales in real-life shops, it has resulted in dramatic increase in subscriber numbers. So thanks hugely to all our subscribers, old and new. 🎧

Tom Hodgkinson

*PS Write to me at [mail@idler.co.uk](mailto:mail@idler.co.uk)*



Photo: Chris Floyd



# Readers' letters

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*Send your comments, quips and ramblings to the Idler, Great Western Studios, 65 Alfred Road, London W2 5EU or mail@idler.co.uk.  
Star letter wins an Idler tote bag.*

## ★★★ Star Letter ★★★

### A woman's work

Sir: I read your *Strike out sister Idler's* diary entry [in Issue 72] with increasing disbelief. You mention "embracing the idle pleasure of being one's own boss" and then have the gall to say women "are more likely to prefer flexible or freelance work in order to strike a better work-life balance"! To me that translates as women, who still do the vast majority of unpaid work, i.e. housework and childcare, have no choice but to work flexibly in order to fit all the rest of the "family stuff" in! Why don't men prefer this flexibility you mention? Because all too often they don't have to think about anything other than their, relatively higher-paid, full-time job. A lot of skilled and educated women I know are in low-paid part-time and self-employed work.

They race to their jobs after school drop-off and race back for school pick-up, to then carry on the rest of their family "duties". Not a single one is "embracing the idle pleasure of being one's own boss", nor do they "prefer the flexibility" – they just don't have a choice. Having returned to work once my children were at school, I now have a flexible job where I can accrue hours in order to take most of August off. This flexible job pays the same per hour as I earned as a student temp 16 years ago ... but I do get to "embrace the idle pleasure" of spending August looking after my children and doing the housework! I can't believe that a thoughtful and intelligent publication such as yours would publish such nonsense. I would advise everyone to read *Invisible Women* by Caroline Criado Perez, who

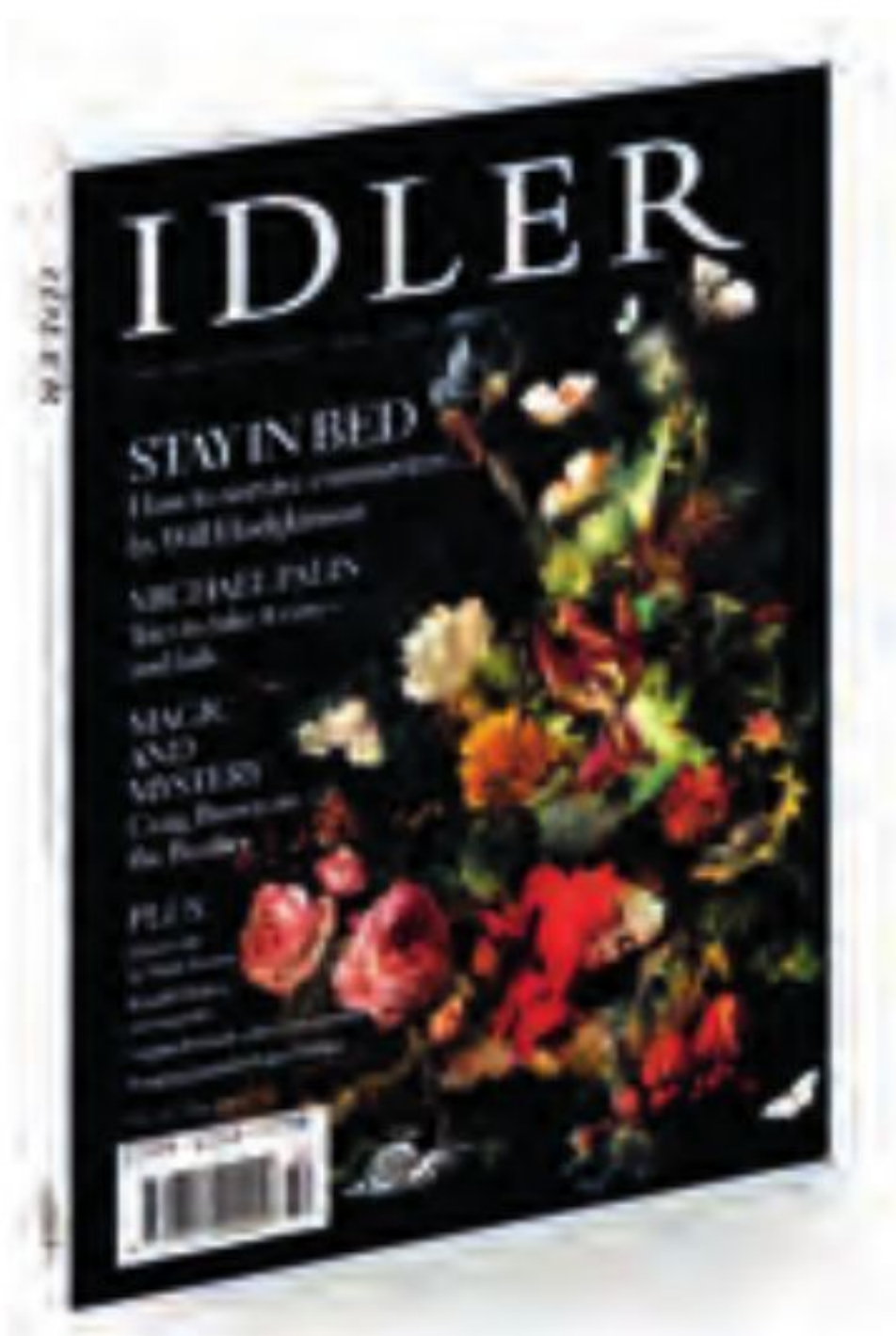


speaks far more eloquently on the subject than I do and is well backed up by facts.

*Rebecca Thompson, via email*

### Strip adviser

Sir: I liked Percy Preston's piece [in Issue 72] on the famous Corinthian FC of the pre-War years. However, I winced on seeing the caption to the recent Corinthian-Casuals photo, which described their kit as "having given over their pristine whites of yore to the forces of pastel sportswear". There's a bit more to it than that. The club, which merged with the equally wonderful Casuals in 1939 to form the new club, has alternated regularly between "the pristine whites" and the distinctive chocolate and salmon halves (with hooped socks) of The Casuals for most of the post-war years. There is conjecture over the origin of these distinctive colours. Some suggest it relates to the racing colours of one of the founders, TW Blenkiron, while others reflect that it may come from a connection with Westminster and Charterhouse schools. Others reckon the colours were a frequent combination for a number of clubs in the 1880s. Whatever, in very recent seasons the chocolate has morphed a little



into a rather classy claret and the salmon into, perhaps, a deeper pink. Nevertheless the historic integrity of the strip remains pretty well there.

*Rod Harrington,  
Taunton, Somerset*

### Rest is history

Sir: As a subscriber I enjoy the range of sources you regularly present in the search for idle inspiration. But you miss a rather obvious idle institution, the Sabbath, the very day prescribed to us to set aside tools, free our minds of the daily drudge and engage in higher thoughts. In his renowned 1951 book on the subject, *The Sabbath*, Abraham Joshua Heschel writes: "To set apart one day a week for freedom, a day on which we would not use the instruments which have been so easily turned into weapons of destruction, a day for being with ourselves, a day of detachment from the vulgar, of independence of external obligations, a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilisation, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow men and the forces of nature – is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for man's progress than the Sabbath?"

I hope you agree and urge you to broaden your sources to include the



not inconsiderable time given by the major faiths to the benefits of idling, such as illustrated here!

*David Shaw, Winchmore Hill,  
north London*

### American idle

Sir: Imagine my surprise when my *Idler* subscription began with the Jan/Feb and Mar/Apr issues arriving simultaneously. Since my home state of Connecticut has had a stay-in-place order since mid-March, with virtually all venues for entertainment closed, I gleefully turned to the *Idler* for edification and amusement. And I was not disappointed. Not only was Tom Hodgkinson's interview with Rowan Williams fascinating (who else can conjure up the images of Plato, William Langland, and Bertie Wooster at one sitting?) but Georgina Williams' piece on yurts recalled the time I spent in them while traveling through Kazakhstan. Ursula Balderson's essay, *Just the job* addresses what we in education are going to experience in the foreseeable future – that less can indeed be more and shorter semesters will allow more time for students and faculty to negotiate a coronavirus world. So, three cheers and thanks to *Idler* staff for making my two-month-long homestay much more interesting.

*Jeffrey J Susla, Woodstock,  
Connecticut*

### Brave new world

Sir, Is coronavirus madness the first example of a social media induced panic? I find it incredible that Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* telescreens are now welcomed into every home in the country. They are not imposed upon us by Big Brother, but actively sought out, and we spend our own money on the devices. "Newspeak", the lingua franca of the BBC and other media news outlets, designed to reduce the capacity of human thought, is applied to almost every newsworthy issue and our discussions revolve around what is deemed "current". Snitching and "virtue signalling" are national pastimes. There are of course advantages to this new way of being, working from home for one, but we seem to have lost something of our sense of equilibrium, of balance, of our equanimity. Perhaps this will in time be seen as a warning against national group think, against too much government control, against too much connectivity, against our habit of attention seeking? Perhaps it will promote the value of idleness, or just being, and work as a clarion call for the values of slowing down, of the simple and natural? In truth I doubt it. Our frantic downhill run into modernity is probably only just beginning, and this is a sign of things to come.

*Stuart Harrison, by email* 📧





Modern Toss





Idler's diary

# Ramblings, gleanings, sightings and jottings from a locked-down planet

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*Compiled by Tom Hodgkinson and Florence Read.*

*Send your stories to us at [mail@idler.co.uk](mailto:mail@idler.co.uk)*



## **Blue sky thinking**

The coronavirus has achieved in months what continual attempts at environmental treaties have failed to deliver: clean and breathable air. The World Health Organisation considers an air quality index of over 25 to be unsafe. Before it enforced lockdown, in the world's most polluted city, Delhi, the AQI level was usually a severe 200 on a good day, though during peak

pollution periods last year they soared well into a life-threatening 900 and sometimes off the measurable scale. But as cars were taken off the roads and factories and construction grounded, AQI levels have now fallen below 20 and blue skies are to be seen again over the previously smogbound city. It's been the same in such previously toxic capitals as Bangkok, Beijing, São Paulo and Bogota, all of which



have seen similar transformations in air quality, while, for the first month of the outbreak, pollution levels in China fell 25 per cent across the country, despite Hubei province being the only area under quarantine.

However, there are some downsides to all this – one very obvious one being that, having been confined to barracks, the citizens of these countries are not at liberty to enjoy these much improved conditions. Environmentalists are also sounding a warning that the world's problems have not been solved by lockdown. Sunita Narain, India's director of the Centre for Science and Environment told *The Guardian*: "Whatever the new normal is post-Covid-19, we have to make sure we take this breath of fresh air and think about the serious efforts we need to deal with pollution in Delhi."

### Elephant in the room

Unlike fake news about elephants roaming free in Chinese cities and dolphins frolicking in Venetian canals, residents of Llandudno in North Wales have actually witnessed a 120-strong herd of wild Kashmiri goats running amok through their streets, eating hedges, invading gardens and generally disobeying social distancing rules – as is the wont of the Devil's



favourite familiar. These impressively horned and cloven-hooved creatures are descendants of a herd given to the monumentally-monikered Major General Sir Savage Mostyn by Queen Victoria. They normally live in the Great Orme country park above the town, although one of them – Fusilier Shenkin IV – serves as a soldier in the Royal Welsh Regiment.



### Bear necessities

Other animal beneficiaries of the lockdown are a pair of highly endangered giant pandas in a Hong Kong zoo. Ying Ying and Le Le have embraced the joy of life without onlookers watching their every step for the first time since they were first paired up at Ocean Park zoo in 2007. Clearly no exhibitionists, the shy creatures mated for the first time in a decade



after the park closed to the public in February. The pregnancy can last for up to 10 months, so it may be a while until staff at the zoo know the results of this attempt, although the park's Executive Director Michael Boos is optimistic. "The chance of pregnancy via natural mating is higher than by artificial insemination," he said. With only 1800 pandas now in the wild, let's hope the project is a success.

### Death Valley

Silicon Valley has been hit with a funding crisis as the virus infects the financial markets. In January, before any coronavirus cases had been confirmed in the USA, venture capitalists helped 126 Silicon start-ups achieve investment. By February, this had plummeted to 60 and only 44 companies in March. A report by law firm Fenwick & West shows



*"Hang on, didn't we have worms yesterday?"*



that investors are giving more to established companies and risking less on new ideas emanating from the San Francisco Bay area. Report co-author Barry Kramer said that although he was only drawing data from a small number of businesses, the numbers were so stark he and his colleagues had decided to break out their monthly data. "Money could be harder to raise in the future," he said.

### Quit gassing

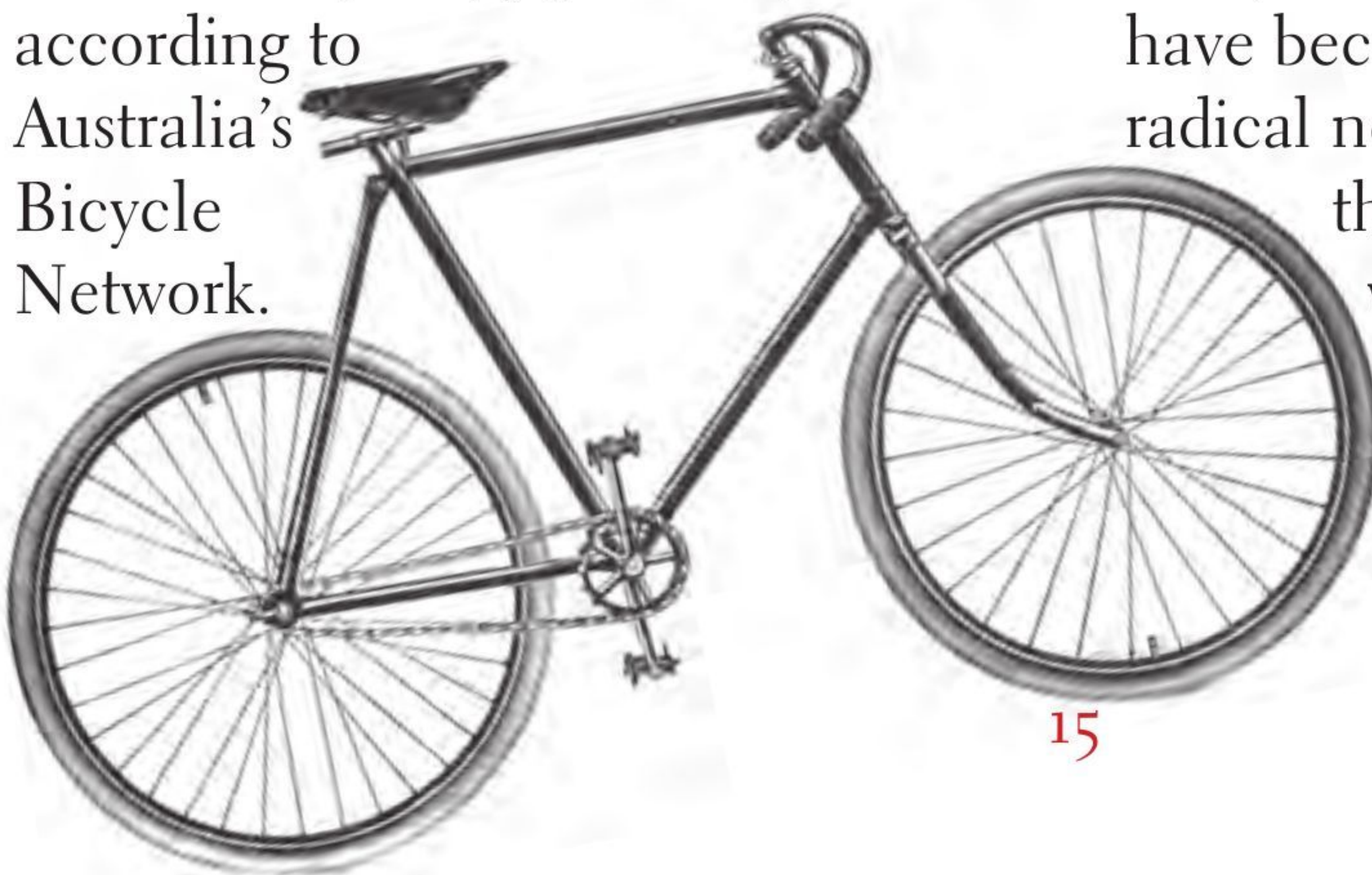
The American oil industry has tanked as people are forced to adapt to life without gas-guzzling cars. On 20 April the price of oil turned negative for the first time in the country's history, after one third of global demand was cut, with grounded planes and bans on unnecessary road travel.

What's more, the *Guardian* reports an unprecedented boom in bicycle sales. Grant Kaplan, manager of Giant, a cycling shop in Sydney told the paper:

"We're the new toilet paper and everyone wants a piece."

Use of some cycle routes had increased up to 79 per cent, according to

Australia's Bicycle Network.



### Money for nothing

A group of 170 opposition politicians have signed a petition calling for Universal Basic Income to be implemented after the coronavirus crisis, in a letter to Chancellor Rishi Sunak published in the *Financial Times* in April.

The cross-party letter, organised by Labour MP Alex Sobel, lays out a plan to pay every adult a flat, unconditional sum each week for the duration of the crisis as a "practical, not ideological" solution to "safeguarding people's health".

Not just MPs but the general public have become a lot more open to radical new ideas such as UBI since

the start of the lockdown, with a survey by campaign group Compassion in Politics finding that 84 per cent of UK workers



supported the immediate introduction of UBI. But despite the idea being mooted by both Ed Milliband in the 2015 Labour manifesto and Shadow Chancellor John McDonald's enthusiasm for the scheme, Labour rejected the idea of introducing a universal basic income during coronavirus. A spokesperson for Keir Starmer stated that: "creating an entirely new social security system is unlikely to be possible during the crisis."

### **National treasure**

The Cerne Abbas Giant, an ancient chalk figure carved on the hillside above the Dorset town near Dorchester, appeared to have been given the unauthorised addition of

a pandemic face mask. Local resident Kevin Knight tweeted a photo of the newly health-conscious club-wielding ogre, saying: "It has put a smile on some of the older people's faces who are shielding and self-isolating." The 180ft figure is not normally accessible to the public, in order to avoid damage and erosion, but this is not the first time he has been altered. His prodigious penis – allegedly used in fertility rites – was adorned with petals and leaves in 2019, while two years earlier the name "Theresa" and a tennis racquet were added on separate occasions. The National Trust, custodians of the site, made it clear that they "don't encourage" this sort of thing.







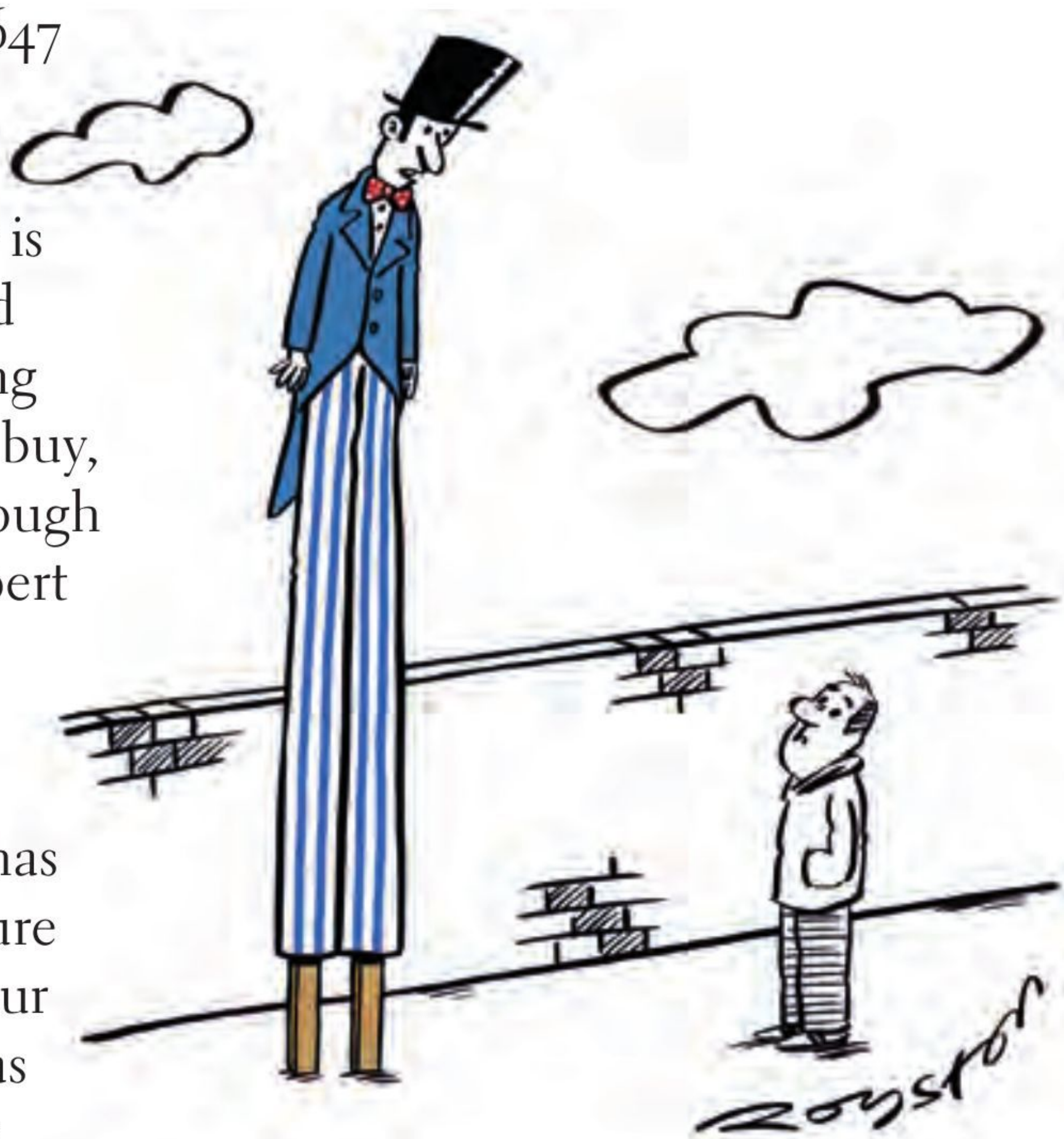
### Use your loaf

Sourdough bread has become the unlikely hero of the coronavirus lockdown. In America, sales of yeast have increased by a whopping 647 per cent, while the National Association of British and Irish Millers say that the sale of flour is up by 92 per cent in the UK and rising. Feeling left out? Providing there are any ingredients left to buy, you can master the art of sourdough with our online course with expert loafer Bridget Hugo.

### Latest laze

All of a sudden the loafing life has gone mainstream, with *FT* feature writer Joy Lo Dico promoting our manifesto “to reframe idleness as something from which virtuous things could flow”. Sky News even extolled the benefits of idling to

good health both mental and physical. And Dwight Garner, writing in the *New York Times*, reckoned that Tom’s book *How to be Idle* should go straight to number one, like REM’s. In a round-up of the great texts on doing nothing, he wrote: “Like Protestants, these books come in many denominations. The wittiest and most profound, the one that covers the most bases, is Tom Hodgkinson’s 2005 classic *How to Be Idle*. I can’t recommend it highly enough.” You can read extracts from Tom’s self-sufficiency manual *Brave Old World* later in this issue. 🎧



“The guidance doesn’t say two metres horizontally.”



# Slow tech

## Appy talk

---



Harry R Lloyd *finds postures new on his smartphone*

No martial art is better suited to the idle life than tai chi: the movements involved have already been slowed down so much over the art's thousand-year history that they're no longer really *martial* at all. The art is roughly analogous with yoga. It's apparently useful not just for stilling your mind and body, but also for improving your performance on the golf course, according to the surprisingly vibrant online community of tai chi and qi gong golfers.

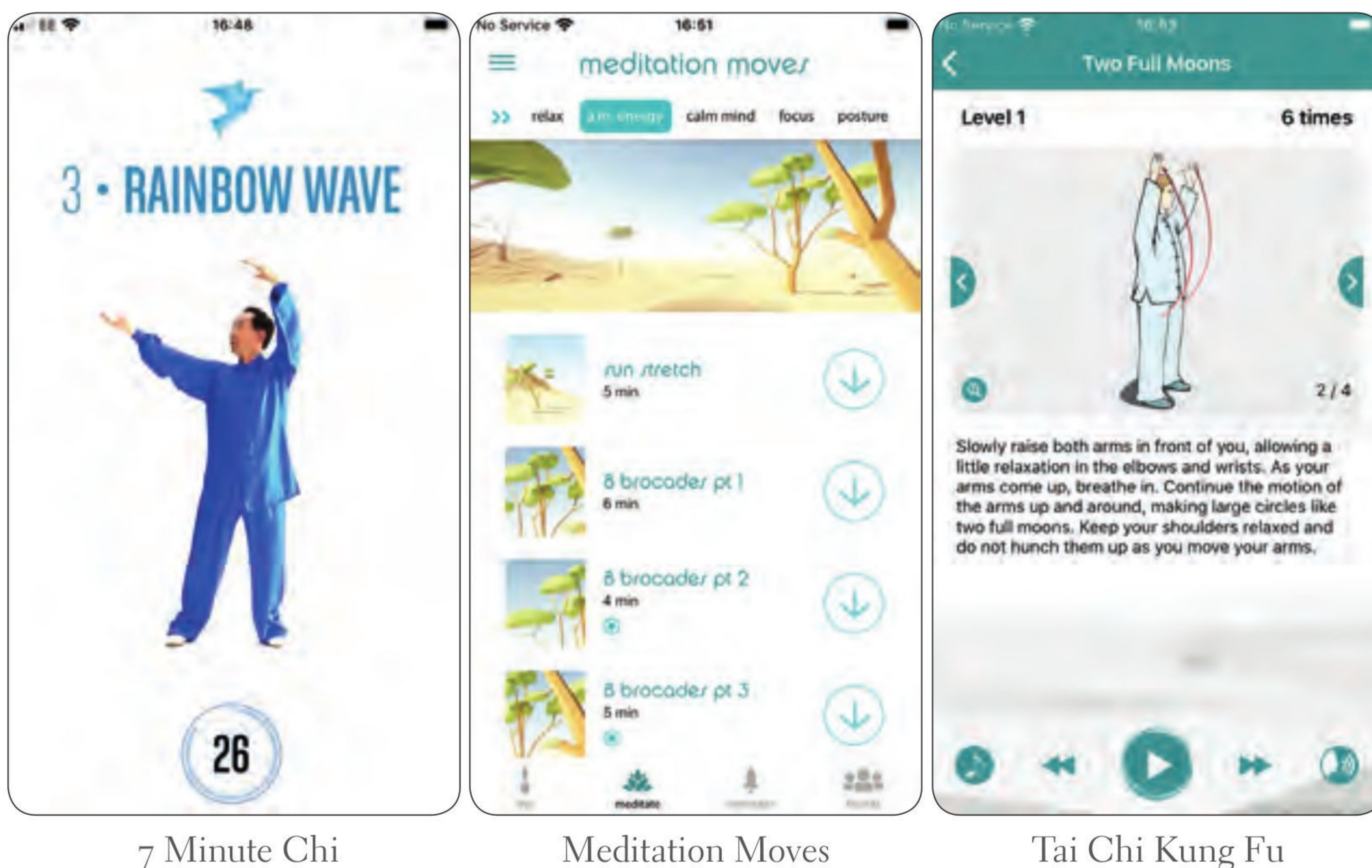
The best way to learn tai chi is, of course, to start attending weekly classes (a comprehensive UK directory can be found at [TaiChiUnion.com](http://TaiChiUnion.com)). But what if you're just too lazy for all that, and prefer to study tai chi in your living room? Well, thanks to some canny Chinese software developers, it turns out you need look no further than the App Store.

Two of the better apps available are: 7 Minute Chi, which has one free routine and two more at \$1.99

each; and Taichi Temple, which costs £3.99 (one-off) and has several routines. On 7 Minute Chi – my top recommendation for beginners – you'll find easy-to-follow videos of a Chinese tai chi master, dressed in oriental-style blue silk accoutrements, and accompanied by a beautiful soundtrack that could have been lifted out of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The instructional voice-over, however, sounds as if it's being produced by a voice-box machine – but if this bothers you, you can quite easily do each routine with the sound off after going through them once or twice.

Taichi Temple is produced by the same developer as 7 Minute Chi, and is quite similar in style and setup, although rather more comprehensive in scope. Other App Store offerings include Meditation Moves and Tai Chi Kung Fu. Meditation Moves costs a whopping \$29.99 a year (although a seven-day free trial is available). In





7 Minute Chi

Meditation Moves

Tai Chi Kung Fu

my opinion it offers very little extra functionality for the extra money.

Tai Chi Kung Fu (£4.99 for the full app) I found a little tedious and not particularly attractively designed. It's rather like an instruction manual in digital form: lots of text accompanied by animated cartoons. Anyone who prefers this style of learning should instead consult Angus Clark's *Illustrated Elements Of Tai Chi*, a classic introductory book, available in paperback or on Kindle.

The nice thing about all of these tai chi resources is that they're really designed to help you become proficient in doing tai chi from memory, at which point you'll no longer need to rely on your app. This is in sharp contrast to all those super-trendy mindfulness

apps like Headspace, or Stop, Breathe & Think, designed to make you reliant on their own proprietary, copyrighted paths to enlightenment. Techniques like tai chi and mantra repetition are only supposed to supply a *framework* for meditation, not to prearrange every last detail for us. Instead of blowing £10 a month on a mindfulness app, why not buy yourself some incense, prayer beads (and maybe some fancy tai chi robes), and apply yourself to meditation the analogue way? 🎧



How I Live

# Mr Sean Laverick: NHS surgeon

---

*Surgery is challenging at the best of times, but the coronavirus outbreak has added a whole new set of difficulties to this critical branch of medicine – not least the threat of death to the doctors involved. Here Mr Laverick takes us through his typical day*

UNTIL recently I could have walked you through my standard working day. A jobbing maxillofacial surgeon, I deal with patients' various facial issues. Sadly in Britain, many facial traumas are the result of interpersonal violence – usually alcohol-induced. Stitches and titanium plates rebuild soft tissues and bones, returning our large numbers of serial offenders back to the bar stool. Then there's an endless referral stream of facial skin cancer. My main subspeciality interest, however, is facial deformity. Disproportionate growth between the various bones of the face results in aesthetic and functional issues that can cause huge psychological damage. Patients commit to a three-year programme concluding in major

surgery. The facial bones are fractured, using saws, drills and chisels, moved and reconstructed. Sounds brutal, I know, but outcomes for patients are very rewarding. It's a long working day, only two weekends off a month, and it's a job I love. But now... well, now everything's been turned on its head by the Covid-19 virus.

A coffee to prise open my eyes has me in the department for an 8am ward round. However, the need to limit patient contact – to protect both them and staff – means the round is now a discussion between staff, and only the consultant and junior doctor on call venture to the ward. After a theatre brief at 8.30 to discuss planning and safety issues, the anaesthetists put today's main case





Scrubbing up: It takes hospital staff ten minutes to get into PPE.  
The mask is useful for four to eight hours. Frequently operations last longer

under general anaesthetic for the day. The patient has no Covid symptoms but could nevertheless be in the infectious pre-symptom stage of the disease – and we must bear in mind that up to 40 per cent of viral tests are false negative. In effect patients are never negative

but indeterminate in status.

At the time of writing, the only non-emergency surgery being dealt with is for cancer cases. I've had to return to head and neck cancer, a different maxillofacial sub-specialty and something I haven't done for 15 years.





Head on: Mr Laverick's face bearing the indents of straps from his mask after a day in surgery. Since the outbreak, he's been applying his skills to treating cases of head and neck cancer

It takes ten minutes or so to put on the personal protective equipment (PPE). Today's case involves a neck dissection to begin with. Two hours to clear the neck of all contents except the great vessels, stripping the lymph nodes to avoid potential cancer spread. Then the main tumour – which is on the tongue and a section of the lower jaw – is removed. This involves an aerosol generating procedure, as a saw is used to section the jawbone. The high-speed instruments whip up the aerosol of blood and saliva and we can but hope that our PPE is sufficient.

Covid severity is dependent upon viral load at the point of infection. This procedure is as much about as load-producing as it gets and we are already now about five hours into the operation. The mask's usefulness is four to eight hours but best not dwell on this thought too long.

Now we have a dissected neck and a large hole in the right jaw and mouth. Normally we would reconstruct with a free flap. A piece of tissue from a remote part of the body is detached with its blood-supplying arterial vessel and its accompanying vein for drainage.



These vessels are then plumbed into the great vessels in the neck, re-establishing the blood circulation and keeping the transferred tissue alive. Normally, that is.

Mid-pandemic however, this is too risky. It means tying up an intensive treatment unit (ITU) bed after the operation at a time when access is at a premium. A complicated reconstruction would also delay the patient's discharge, and a prolonged hospital stay is currently to be avoided for their sake. As a consequence, the reconstruction is a rotated section of skin and muscle from the chest. Turned up across the neck, it is rotated in to fill the hole in the jaw and mouth, covering a large metal plate that has been used to hold the sectioned jaw in place.

We would normally have had a break for a quick bite to eat and a cup tea at this point, but the nursing staff remind us we don't have enough PPE to rescrub, so we have to push on through. Two hours to lift the chest tissue, sew it in place, sort out any residual bleeding and put drains into the neck. Staples to close the neck for speed and we are out at around 5pm. A relatively early finish.

My face is deeply indented with the straps from the PPE, my nose aching from the pressure of the mask and a splitting headache threatens until I can rehydrate.

Following an evening ward round I can escape home. I'm not on call tonight so any post-operative issue with the patient is my colleague's problem, although the unwritten rule is he will call me if he needs help.

At home it's my first meal of the day, cobbled together by myself and my partner, who has also finished a day doctoring, on the Covid-positive respiratory ward. I have a day's emails to deal with, a paper to review for our scientific journal and a reference to write for one of the junior doctors. In the background a Bollywood film keeps my better half in cultural contact with her family back in India. An Ovaltine sees me off to bed around midnight, turning the alarm on again for 6.30am – ward round first thing.

This is a strange time. A stressful time. My close colleague and friend has been in ITU for two weeks now. Five years younger than me, fit and healthy, he presumably got a large viral load. I don't know if he'll pull through, I hope so. Both my partner and I remain high risk and we just try to be as safe as we can. My daughter worries about me; she's 15 and old enough to fully understand the implications. I try to explain that while there is some risk for us, it's an honour to work in these strange days. A little idling is long overdue though. 🌀



## How I Live

# Pete Penny: shelf stacker

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*They perform the vital task of helping to keep us all fed. So what's life like for supermarket workers right now? Pete Penny takes us through his daily routine*

I WORK as a “colleague” (essentially a shelf stacker) in Produce, i.e., the fruit and veg section of a large supermarket in Birkenhead, Merseyside. I do four or five shifts a week, always in the 2pm to 9pm slot. My workday routine is pretty regular. My phone wakes me at 8am and I shuffle downstairs to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. I live in a large shared house that many local kids call “the castle” because we always fly a flag from our tower “battlements”.

Back up to my room with my caffeine infusion, I look at the *Guardian* online while taking regular suckles of my vape (why do they all look like scooter carburettors?).

I prefer the 2pm to 9pm shift as it means the majority of my daily

mental energy is mine to spend, and the majority of my physical energy I'm content to use up in hefting fruit and veg. After breakfast and a shower I'll read for a couple of hours, ensuring it's mostly books (offline). I found that for the first few weeks of the lockdown, I somehow segued into reading solely from my laptop, and hardly lifted a book. This was a result, I think, of looking for updates and perspectives on the virus, and I ended up compulsively flitting from online article to opinion-piece to update, with diminishing returns, eventually finding myself increasingly dwelling in a well-informed but anxiety-filled fug.

I made a deliberate effort to return to books, and to limit searching online. For the same reason, I've avoided “got-it lit” –





Having had his daily intake of food and reading matter,  
Pete gets ready for the two-hour walk into work

Camus' *The Plague*, Defoe's *A Journal Of The Plague Year* and so on. I've enjoyed biographies – Nick Tosches' *Night Train* and *Hellfire*, and Emmanuel Carrère's *Limonov*; perhaps reading about lives lived to the full helps offset the feeling of stasis, of life-unlived that I currently often feel. Also short stories really appeal at present – Kevin Barry, Joy Williams, Ben Marcus and Ottessa Moshfegh (the stranger the better).

After an early lunch, I get into a clean uniform and walk the two miles to work. In the initial days of the lockdown I would rarely pass anyone (particularly returning

home after 9pm) and the roads were often entirely deserted at night, but foot and road traffic has crept back up incrementally. Even when the roads were almost deserted I would often meet impatient drivers unwilling to dab at their brakes when I needed to cross. They seemed to be placeholders for those pricks awaiting the return of the Old Normal, the selfish normal. They'd got used to the roads being as deserted as a car ad director's wet dream, and were now unable to countenance any delay.

The work environment has



changed a fair bit since February. We now have (friendly) door staff (“If your name ain’t on your shopping list then you ain’t getting in!”) present all day, who ensure customers queue, and admit only as many as can be accommodated to allow safe distancing inside the store. The shop now resembles a very basic maze, with directional arrows and chevron tape in company colours on the floor for all to follow. We can wear masks (provided) if we wish. Most don’t. I don’t because they quickly become unpleasant when you’re physically exerting yourself.

I do take many hand-washing trips to the staff toilets though. Particularly in Produce, customers like to handle the fruit and veg while making a choice, and so will often touch half a dozen items before trolleying one. I estimate I wash my hands between 20 and 30 times each shift. We have industrial-sized containers of hand sanitiser in the toilets. It looks as if you’re dispensing kebab shop mayonnaise over your hands before each wash. I douse my hands with hand cream each night, but my knuckles remain sandpapery.

Every day is Big Shop day now. No more popping in for a sandwich and crisps. Everyone’s a trolley shopper – who would bother waiting in line for just a few items? As well as the queue outside, we

have more people sitting begging near the store entrance than ever before – often half a dozen – and when the weather’s fine, they’re there for the long haul, only occasionally being moved on by the police. Surprisingly, we still get shoplifters. They must’ve queued to get in too, so gone is the traditional defence that it was a compulsive, non-premeditated act, I would think (if the courts are even bothering with shoplifters at the mo). Having fewer customers in the store, and the absence of clustering, must test the “lifter”’s pilfering skills to the limit.

There is of course a spectrum of customer behaviour. Roughly 20 per cent are masked, and perhaps gloved, and move in an exaggeratedly safety-first fashion. About 60 per cent accord the safety measures due attention but seem unfazed, and the remainder act as if nothing has changed: they cluster; meander; rifle through the goods; get too close to you when asking questions; occasionally touch you to get your attention and are pissed off if something is unavailable.

A few customers say, “Thanks for keeping us fed,” or “Good for you, doing this,” usually shyly. But more generally the stock worth of us shop workers seems to have neither risen nor fallen. Fair enough – it’s not like we’re the health workers, leaning in towards the afflicted,



and saving lives on the NHS frontline.

We spend our breaks in the staff canteen. The long communal tables have gone, replaced by small ones spaced at a safe distance, where we sit (two people maximum) facing each other. It's rather like a speed dating event where the organisers have forgotten to say: "Please change places now!"

It's often quiet and contemplative, with workers seeming absent in thought. Many others are physically absent, as they fall into "at high risk" categories of one kind or another, and have been granted a 12-week period of absence, paid.

The company have been regularly laying on cupcakes and other pleasant snacks as an ongoing "thank you", and propose to pay all staff who work throughout the period an additional week's wages next month. They do make an effort to keep reminding us they're grateful for our efforts.

On my good days I feel oddly calm, and the measured pace of the customers, as well as the physical environment, reinforce that feeling. On my not so good days it feels like I'm awaiting some long-postponed but nevertheless inevitable catastrophe to manifest. And I then consider: "Do I just carry on until I get ill, or a cure arrives, or whatever?" Yes, I guess I do.

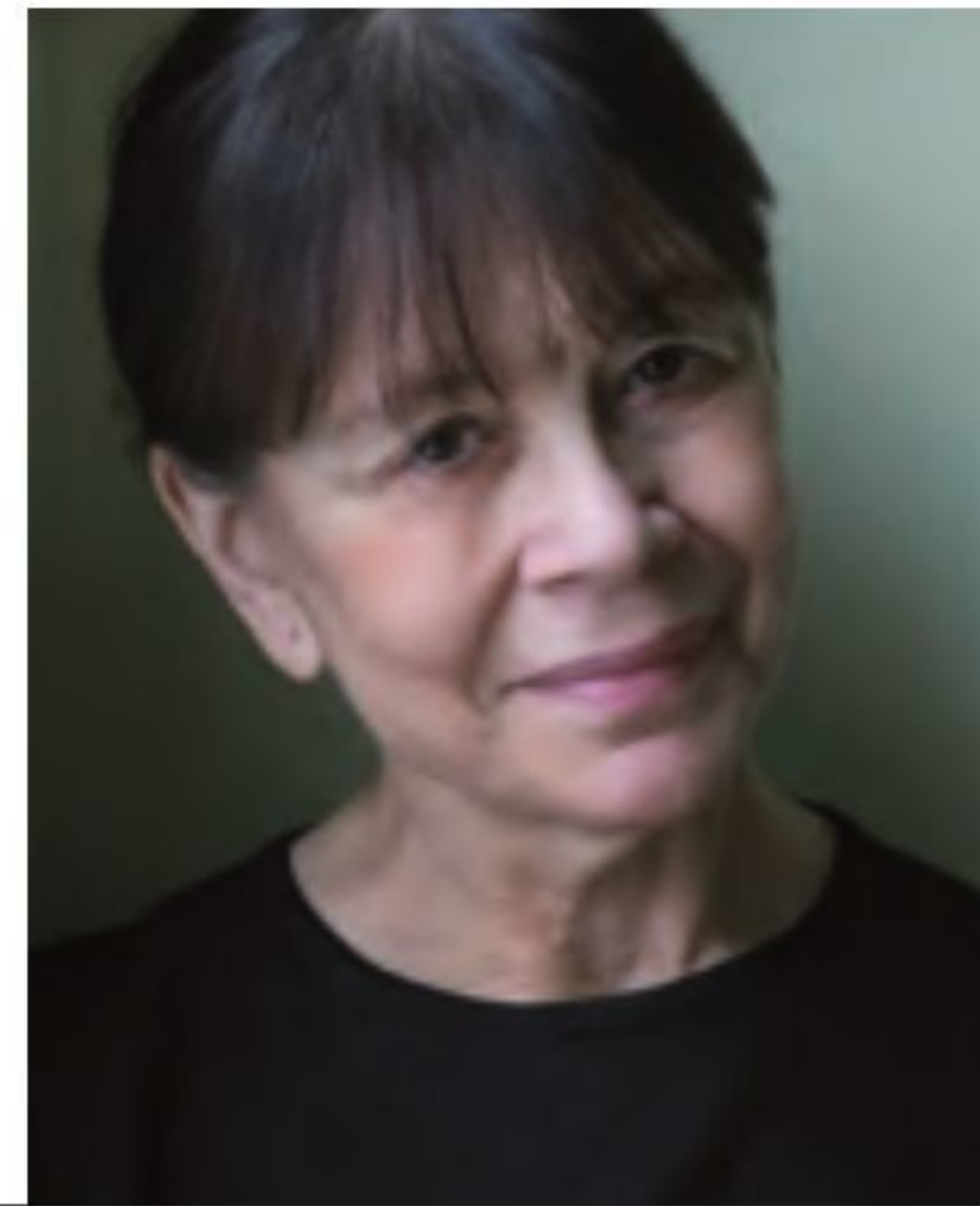
When I eventually finish my

shift, I buy what I need and go through the self-service till so a co-worker will have one less person to be exposed to. I walk home through the quietened streets and put my key in the door around 10pm. Then I shower and put my spent uniform in the washing machine. I make some food – often a sandwich – and go up to my room at the top of "the castle". I eat, check emails and social media, then dim the lighting and prop myself comfortably on my bed. I invariably listen to audiobooks at night as they're a perfect way to prepare to reset myself with sleep. For an hour or so I'll listen to something factual, Mark O'Connell's *To Be A Machine*, and *Notes From An Apocalypse* have been recent listens (for some reason I don't mind anxiety and hysteria if it's channelled through my ears rather than read), but once I know I'm content to drift in and out of sleep, I'll switch to an audio novel; *The Gallows Pole* by Benjamin Myers and *The Three-Body Problem* by Cixin Liu this last week, and my day subsides. 🎧



## Problems

# Virginia Ironside



*Our agony aunt tells it straight. Send your issues to us at [mail@idler.co.uk](mailto:mail@idler.co.uk)*

### To die for?

I recently spoke to my mother, a 75-year-old widow, and she suddenly told me the coronavirus scare is the last straw and rather than self-isolate she'd be quite happy if the virus carried her off. There's nothing wrong with her. She's perfectly fit, has a wide circle of friends, goes walking a lot and doesn't seem depressed. But I'm appalled at her statement. Should I get her to see a doctor? I mean 75 seems really young to be thinking like this.

*Carola, by email*

**H**ER reaction is perfectly understandable. Younger people, particularly those who wake up in the morning with a smile on their faces and joy in their hearts, simply can't understand people who find living difficult. But many, even apparently successful, active ones, find living not all it's cracked up to be, particularly as they

accumulate aches and pains and realise the future only consists of things that they'll no longer be able to do rather than things they look forward to doing. It sounds as if your mother is being very philosophical. I don't know how old you are but however young you should already, like the great philosophers of old, start contemplating your own death so that the inevitable doesn't come as too much of a horrible surprise when it approaches. Remember what Proust said: "We are all but dead people waiting to take up our posts." Think about that and admire your mother for her stoic and resigned acceptance about what is going to come to all of us in the end.

### A fridge too far?

At my office there's a shared fridge, but nobody ever cleans it out. It was so gross when I went in last week that I just chucked the contents in



the bin. Now my co-worker is mad with me because apparently she was keeping a slice of cake in there from her birthday last year as a memento. Firstly, who does that? And secondly, does she really have the right to be angry?

*Anna F, Highgate, London*

THE truth is that she was wrong to use the communal fridge for her personal cake relics and you were wrong to clean out the fridge behind everyone's backs without warning them. If you want a quiet and friendly life and if you want to occupy the high moral ground, simply apologise profusely and say you'll never do it again. Sometimes if you do that the other person, realising you've grabbed the upper hand, feels compelled to apologise for their side of the conflict and you can all be friends. It may not come out like that but you can still claim credit for being grown-up about it all and keeping the peace, which is far more important, unless it's a matter of life and death, than being right.

### **Grieve or leave?**

How long after a bereavement is it OK to dump your boyfriend? He lost his father a year into our relationship, about six months ago. I was going to end it when the whole thing happened out of the blue and I just couldn't face leaving

when he needed so much support. I feel so guilty for faking it when he's been through such a shit time. Part of me thinks I should just stick around another year to be sure he's all right, but he isn't the person I want to spend my life with, so what's the point?

*GH, Liverpool*

IS the person he is now – broken and depressed – the person you don't want to spend the rest of your life with? In which case it might be kindest to give him a chance to recover, hoping you might eventually see him as the lovely person you fell in love with. But if you can see this current person as part of a grisly whole, which colours even your previous impression, then it's kindest to leave. He can get another girlfriend sooner, and you won't have to live a lie for a year.

### **The big issue**

Over the last year I've put on a lot of weight, more than three stone. I look very different from how I used to and I can tell I'm the elephant in the room in a lot of social situations. Friends and relatives try to tell me how "well" I look, without mentioning the fact I'm fat. This isn't something I'm ashamed of and I would like to make light of it, but nobody seems to want to join in with my jokes. I feel like they don't believe I could



actually be all right with being this size. How can I get them to relax?

*Debbie, Brighton*

**Y**OU don't say how tall you are or how much you weigh. If you used to be 6ft and a beanpole, then that's fine. But if you're 5ft 4in and last year you weighed 11 stone, then that's not really all right. You also don't say how all this came about, which would be interesting. I can't imagine that one day you got a craving for doughnuts and since

then you've never stopped. Maybe it's clear to others that although you say you're OK with your weight and you believe it, you're actually not. Jokes like this usually belie an underlying anxiety. Maybe your friends are seriously worried about your health. Whatever, the answer is: either find out the true reason you've put on so much weight and make sure you really are OK with it – or lose weight. Or realise that your jokes just aren't that funny. Stop making them. 🎧



*“I don’t need to adjust my webcam,  
this is how I actually look.”*



# work





# The Good Stuff

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*Excellent inventions, bold businesses and bright ideas rounded up by Annabel Sampson and Charlotte Brook*

## Game on

**D**ORITOS, Pringles, Skips, Monster Munch: most of us are *au fait* with the savoury snack landscape, perhaps even consider ourselves connoisseurs. But have you tried Taste of Game? If you have never sampled the delights of wild duck, grouse, smoked pheasant and wild boar, paired with fruity sides of whinberry, plum sauce and apple, then what better vehicle to test out your tastebuds than the humble crisp? Taste of Game are

already purveyors of fine meats with an emphasis on the local, harvested and hunted, encouraging a sustainable involvement with natural food. Their resounding mission is to get more people eating game as part of a healthy diet, and hope these crisps will serve as a snack springboard to the wider public enjoying wild fare. An idle snack if there ever was one – and their packaging is rather smart.

[tasteofgame.org.uk](http://tasteofgame.org.uk)







## Chic in wolf's clothing

**I**T'S not just chic Parisian women we should look to for fashion inspiration, but also their artisans and crafts folk. La Tuile à Loup (which translates as "The Wolf Tile") create the most cheering, one-off, handmade ceramics: brightly painted plates, platters, tureens and soup dishes that cannot be found anywhere else. Eric Goujou, who bought the shop in 2006, has courted some French artisans, and is there to pick out the best as the kiln opens. The dapper French gent with the collector's eye tells the Good Stuff: "Our inventory is as diverse, changing, and ephemeral as the creativity and

inspiration of its makers." Head to their Instagram for an eyeful of their wonders – a terrine dish crowned with a sculptural rabbit or friendly woodpecker, surrealist plates or alpine pottery pitchers. Particular Good Stuff favourites are their female figurine planters and lady figurine candlesticks, ladies with sensationally round faces, pursed lips and either rosy or freckle splattered cheeks. All the shapes, vivid colours and blazing patterns would enliven any dining experience.

@latuilealoup  
35 Rue Daubenton,  
75005 Paris, France



## Milk of paradise

**L**A Latteria was the first mozzarella-maker in Britain. It was founded by Simona Di Vietri, who threw in the towel at her London-based investment banking job to make a “real” version of the cheese she missed so much – this country’s imports being a great disappointment to her Italian palate. Her mozzarella is called *fior di latte*, the full name for the variety made not from buffalo but cow’s milk. Why? “I ask myself the same question every morning!” she wails down the phone during this corona-cursed time. It turns out

speed is of the essence to moreish mozzarella – when it is flown from Italy, it will be weeks old by the time it gets to our plates. At La Latteria, the milk from two merry troops of cows in Kent and Oxfordshire is zoomed up to North Acton each morning, straight into the arms of Simona’s head cheesemaker, who spins and stretches it into orbs great and small of trad mozzarella and the highly fashionable burrata. You really can taste the difference.

[lalatteria.co.uk](http://lalatteria.co.uk)







## On the tiles

**Y**ES, you have read the website address for the home of tiling heaven correctly. As founder Sophie Caulfeild tells us: “I’m the reason behind the weird spelling.” We are pleased to hear it, as the dropping and swapping of vowels for aesthetic purposes is a cause of *ennui* here at GS HQ. Unlike Sophie’s creations, which caught our eye instantly. Some of these

glorious, glossy glazed squares are made in Porto, home of tiling heaven, and some of them she makes herself. All are charming, but the eye is particularly drawn to those hand-painted with fruity decoration: plump pomegranates in oxblood red or saffron yellow and the shower of cherries and their leaves are special favourites.

feild.works 



Poem

# The Sun's Having Lunch With The Moon

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*by* John Moore

Why is the sky so grey Mama  
This Monday afternoon?  
Because my Dear, because my Dear  
The sun's having lunch with the moon

And why has the tide gone out, Mama  
Will it be back soon?  
Oh yes my Dear oh yes my Dear  
It's following the moon

But why is the world so sad, Mama  
Do you feel it too?  
Perhaps my Dear from time to time  
But not when I'm with you

But do you think of bitter things  
And dreams that can't come true?  
Of course my Dear, of course my Dear  
That's what grownups do

But when I'm old like you Mama  
Will I feel them too?  
Oh no my Dear for God has tears  
Especially for you

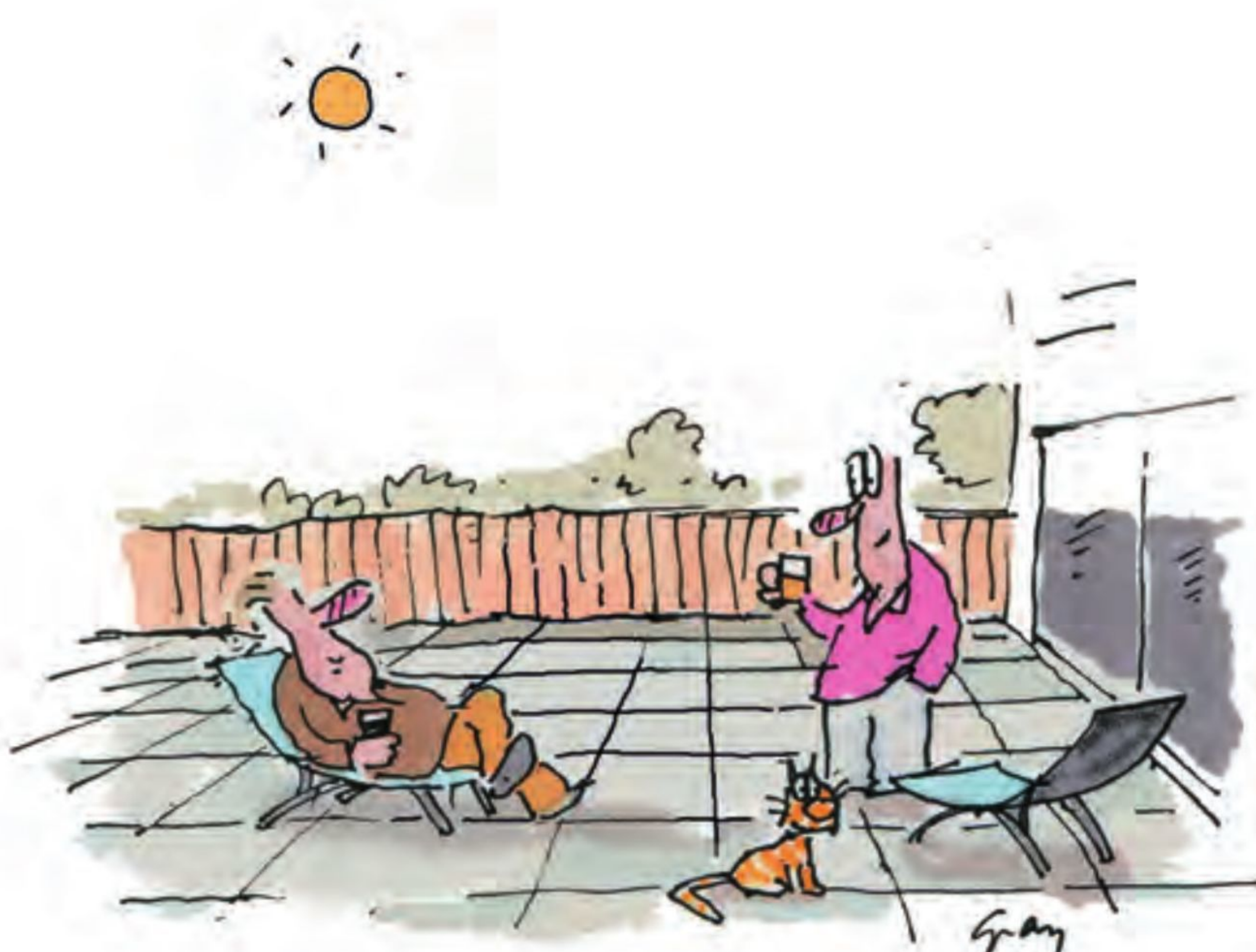


All that I can say my boy  
And all that we can do  
Is make the best of everything  
And try to muddle through

So why oh why then do you cry  
Will you smile soon?  
If I make a funny face  
If I am the moon?  
Will you come and lunch with me  
This Monday afternoon?  
Then the sky won't be so grey  
And we can be back soon. 🎧

*John Moore is a singer and songwriter, formerly of Black Box Recorder and The Jesus and Mary Chain. His first collection of poems, New Routes to the Summits of Despair, is out late 2020. He lives in London.*

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*"This used to be a garden - all it took was a little imagination."*





[photo: Matt Crockett]



## Interview

# Masters of merriment

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*Every Thursday the Idler hosts an online event where Tom Hodgkinson chats to our favourite people. Here are a few comedy television greats we've been Zooming with*

### Armando Iannucci and Peter Fincham

Armando Iannucci is the writer and director behind *The Day Today*, *The Thick Of It*, *Veep*, *The Death Of Stalin* and *The Personal History Of David Copperfield*. Peter Fincham ran TalkBack productions before taking a series of top jobs at BBC One and ITV. He now manages his own production company, Expectation.

**TOM HODGKINSON** So, Peter, you're a grand personage in television. There was TalkBack, the company started by Griff Rhys Jones and Mel Smith. Then BBC One, then ITV and now your own production company. But the pinnacle of your career so far is as a blogger for the *Idler*.

**PETER FINCHAM** Absolutely true. I'm delighted to be blogging for you. But yes, Armando and I worked together at TalkBack. When you describe it that way, it sounds almost like a career but it's really been an accidental series of stumbles into different things. When I left TalkBack I had no plan to become the head of a big TV network. But it came my way. Then I left the BBC rather prematurely after one of those scandals the BBC has from time to time, long forgotten by nearly everybody, I'm delighted to say.

**TH** Could you fill us in on that?

**PF** There was a photo shoot with the Queen, it was Annie Leibovitz. And a production company made a documentary and edited it to look like the Queen had walked out of the shoot in a huff, which she would never do. And it caused something I think you don't want to experience twice in your life, which is to find yourself at the centre of a media storm. I remember I'd go to the village shop and avert my eyes from the newspaper rack thinking, "Oh



God, there's going to be another awful story." Anyway, yes, I went back into independent production, and that's what I do now.

**TH** Right. And what about your hair? It looks pretty good.

**PF** My 18-year-old daughter offered to cut it and I said, "That'd be great." She used clippers and did it outside where there was no mirror so I wasn't in control in any way, and I now look like a boiled egg. I've got used to it though – I quite like it now. And I'm saving money on hair products. But Armando, who's known me for 25 years, has never seen me like this. This is a new me.

**ARMANDO IANNUCCI** I've never seen you as a full Bruce Willis.

**PF** I should've come in a white vest and been Bruce Willis at his peak.

**AI** Or is it Prince William?

**TH** Or Andrew Neil.

**AI** We sheared the dog today.

**PF** It's very dangerous to shear your dog because of clipping its skin, but it was getting so hairy and hot, so we did the same. Mine was part of the same batch as the dog hair cut.

**AI** The only panic buying I did as lockdown loomed was to buy online a pair of hair clippers and dog clippers. Those were my first two thoughts.

**TH** Armando, who is with you in your lockdown and where are you?

**AI** I'm at home in Hertfordshire. I'm in my office in the garden.

**TH** Like a George Bernard Shaw-style shed where you work and get away from everyone else?

**AI** Was it George Bernard Shaw's one that rotated to let the sun in? No, it's not one of those. I've always had an office in the garden because with writing you need to concentrate and I always like being near the house but not in it. I'm at home with my wife and the youngest of our three kids. They've all grown up but one is about to turn 18 so she's here. And our three dogs. We had two, then there was an accident and we had five and kept one of the young ones.

**TH** Is a typical day for you spent writing alone?

**AI** I say "writing" but most stuff I do is displacement activity for writing. Which is why I like working on shows where there's a writing team. That's the thing I miss most [in lockdown]. The fun is to be had when you spend all day in a room with two or three writers... the laughter, the camaraderie.

**TH** Do you have an office in London?

**AI** I've got an office and there's a writing room there which we can use. And, I'm slightly traditionalist – I like the idea of being a commuter so I do commute in. Ignore lockdown – no I'm not saying to 'ignore lockdown', but for the purposes of this answer, imagine we are back to normal – I actually quite like the routine of taking the train in every morning and going into the office and



working with the writers, or whoever, and then taking the train home. I think it's because when I told my mum that I was going into comedy, I could see all her hopes drop. And I think it's a slight remnant of guilt. If I tell myself I'm doing a regular job like most people do, instead of this enormous skive that I seem to have been doing for the last 30 years. I once overheard her on the phone saying to a friend 'well he's doing comedy now but I'm sure sooner or later he'll be doing *Panorama*.

**TH** So I was thinking about the amazing work you've done. With *The Day Today* you parodied current affairs broadcasting, then in a Swiftian manner, you tried to describe what goes on behind the scenes in British government with *The Thick Of It*. Then you went to America to do *Veep*, which was similar but even more frantic. The fearlessness is extraordinary. And then to make a film about Stalin, a comedy, which somehow says more about the subject than all the serious stuff. And then Dickens! Peter said he's never had any sort of plan in his career – have you?

**AI** I think most people in comedy and quite a lot in television would say no, you just sort of stumble into it. You find you have a feel for it, or an enthusiasm, and one thing leads to another. I was always a big radio comedy fan. As a teenager *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* came out on the radio and that for me was a revelation in terms of what radio could do with comedy, and the comedy of ideas as opposed to just jokes and sketches. You know, narrative, and yet play with abstract ideas.

**TH** Armando, I've compared you to Swift. Is that a fair comparison?

**AI** Well, I'm not sure but I'm more than happy to take it. And going back to your original question, I think you absorb things – like I absorbed *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* and *Radio Active*, which was also on at the time, and I went into radio comedy. But as a kid, and this makes me slightly more geeky than most, I was also a huge Dickens fan. What struck me was his amazing sense of humour – he was a really, really funny writer. But also his ambition. He was the most famous writer in the world by his mid-20s; he'd written *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*. And he used that platform to talk about really challenging issues like child labour and factory conditions and terrible schools, the proximity of wealth and poverty in the city and so on – issues that sadly are still around – and yet at the same time he was quite happy to appeal to the masses. So that's always been an inspiration.

**TH** So Armando, what have you been up to creatively?

**AI** We're writing the next season of *Avenue 5*, our HBO show, which is about a cruise liner in space which is then stranded there for eight years, with Hugh



Laurie as the captain – except he’s not a qualified captain, he was just hired to look like one for an eight-week mission. It’s slightly odd because it’s fundamentally about people stuck, isolated in these surroundings, with very poor leadership and no way of knowing whether they’ll get out. So we’re not sure – will people want to see this? And also, as Peter will indicate, there’s no way of knowing when we’ll be able to film it.

**PF** That’s a nightmare. It’s true for all drama, all comedy at the moment and it’s governed by rather tedious issues like insurance. If you can’t insure a production you literally can’t embark on it, and insurers won’t cover coronavirus. So the industry is locked, thinking how to get round this.

**AI** And you’re limited now to doing lockdown drama with monologues and duologues. But at some point we’ll get sick of that. We’re going to want to see car chases, fights.

**PF** And kisses.

**AI** Yes hugs and kisses.

**TH** Now, what’s the point of comedy? Is it just to entertain, are you trying to make a social change, or is it to make people feel less alone in the world?

**PF** Of course it is to entertain. But does it make a difference in the world? We’ve made a radio programme on BBC Sounds about *The Thick Of It*, Armando’s series which told us more about politics and what goes on behind the scenes than a dozen documentaries could. It held up a satirical light to something that needed to be changed – some of the dishonesty and shallowness of putting presentation first in politics. That sits in a tradition that, as you’ve already said, Tom, is a Swiftian tradition. I don’t think that’s the only reason or justification for comedy, but I certainly think it means comedy is more than just let’s make people laugh by telling some jokes. It can have a higher and a lower purpose simultaneously.

**AI** As we were researching *The Death Of Stalin*, we went to Moscow and spoke to people who’d either grown up during Stalin, or whose parents had. And they said that one thing, which was illegal but people did, was they circulated jokes about Stalin. There were Stalin joke books – jokes at the expense of Stalin and of the Kremlin. And you could be killed if you were heard telling one of these jokes or caught in possession of them. Yet the people said they needed to, because if they could tell a joke about Stalin it meant he hadn’t got them. He could lock us up, they’d say, he could take away our business, our livelihood, he could put us in Siberia, but if I can still make a joke about him, he hasn’t shut my brain down. As Peter said, there are gradations of effect that comedy can have, but there’s something in it that marks us out. We’re the only animal that makes jokes as far as I know. And I think that’s



important. It defines us. And people go into comedy because we like making people laugh, we like the sound of laughter, it's such a joyous emotion.

### Sally Phillips and Jane Bussmann

Sally Phillips is an actress and writer. She was a key member of *Smack The Pony* and has appeared in *Miranda* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Jane Bussman has worked on *South Park*, *The Fast Show*, *Smack The Pony* and *Brass Eye*. At the time of the interview she was locked down in Spain.



[Photo: Chris Floyd]

**TOM HODGKINSON** Sally, how have you been keeping yourself sane?

**SALLY PHILLIPS** I haven't been sane at all is the truth. A comedian tweeted last week, "I've used lockdown to write a novel. Sorry did I say novel? I meant this tweet." That basically sums up my lockdown experience. When this happened I didn't fall apart exactly but I've achieved absolutely nothing. I've started trying to make short films. I just turned 50, so a 50-year-old woman trying to edit on her iPhone has been something terrible to behold. I've tried to learn the ukulele. It diffuses your rage like no other instrument. I don't think you can get suicidal if you're playing the ukulele.

**TH** Now, Jane is your old pal and writing buddy. How did you meet and have you communicated over the last few weeks?

**SP** Yes we have. We met in 1992, when there were only about three women under 30 writing comedy – me, her and Sue Perkins. So we used to meet up and complain. Jane wrote with David Quantick. She used to write gags for radio DJs. She and David used to wear orange shell suits. Jane left school at 16 to be the *Guardian's* acid house correspondent. She'd written books on drugs and was by far the coolest person I'd met.

**TH** Did she make you feel quite square?

**SP** Extremely square.

**JANE BUSMANN** I dispute this all. I am certainly not the coolest person Sally has ever met.

**TH** So, Jane, why are you in Spain?

**JB** I came to do some writing but got thoroughly [caught] in lockdown. To the extent that you'll get stopped by the cops here if you go out. We've been stopped twice – you need a permit saying you're going out to buy dog food or something. But it's fantastic. The lockdown's worked brilliantly here. Everyone obeys it. You know what you're supposed to do. There's no vague-



ness. We got corona on the first day of lockdown. And we just decided not to go out at all, and ended up eating the chicken food rather than subject any of the nice people of Spain to our hideous disease. I can tell you that chicken's corn does not pop when you try to make popcorn out of it. It was awful.

TH How long did you do that for? That's so incredibly selfless and altruistic.

JB It was. I amaze myself.

TH Instead of eating their food, why didn't you eat their eggs?

SP She's a vegan.

TH So when you two write together, how does it work?

SP We haven't written that much together. But we did the first ever internet sitcom together, called *The Junkies*.

TH I remember that. That was brilliant. So was that you as well, Jane?

JB It was me and David Quantick. We did it with Sally and Peter Baynham and Peter Serafinowicz and Kevin Eldon.

TH You were the first people to bring out the humour in heroin addiction.

SP It's like *Friends* but they're on heroin!

TH Jane, have you been looking after Sally during this stressful time?

JB She just invites me out for virtual cocktail parties. I *laid down* 13 bottles of wine. I say "laid down", I mean *bought* for two euros in Lidl. And after a few of these Zoom parties with Sally all the wine was gone, and I thought, "Well, we had loads of people over", then was like "Oh no. We didn't. That's bad."

SP Drinking virtually is a lot more dangerous than drinking in the pub.

TH Can I run this really bad sketch idea past you both because you're comedy geniuses? So we've got a friend who, when we would ask her, "How was your weekend?" she'd say, "Oh it was amazing, I was hanging out with Kate Moss and Bobby Gillespie at the Laylow club" and stuff like that. And about four weeks ago we said, "Hi, how was your weekend?" and she said, "It was amazing. I've got this friend who's a nurse, I've been hanging out with the nurses." So there's this idea that the status of celebrities is rapidly sinking and the status of key workers is rapidly rising. So my idea for a sketch, which is probably absolutely terrible, was that there's a nightclub and Bobby Gillespie and Kate Moss are waiting to get in and the bouncer says, "No, can you just wait please." Then a group of nurses turn up and go straight in. Do you think that's funny?

JB That works.

SP It's such an interesting idea but it doesn't make me laugh. It's like Soviet art. Should comedy be making a point? Chris Morris, who Jane's written for and with a lot, had a rule that comedy was never allowed to be about anything, or to make a political point. And I think it's a really interesting period with the



whole diversity and art for art's sake. There's a big discussion to be had about whether art, and I include comedy, should be in the service of something. So you've done a standard swap and made an interesting intellectual point.

**TH** Comedy should make you feel better because it's expressing something you'd half noticed yourself and it's a release to feel someone else is experiencing the same thing.

**JB** I got a good joke from my brother which was, "Wanted: Someone to play the bagpipes while I masturbate. No weirdos please." The feminists would not have allowed that.

**SP** I think there's two comedic traditions. There's the *bouffon* and the clown. So the clown is the person who falls down a well or walks into a wall, while the *bouffon* is the satirist, who says, "Thank you for putting me in the ghetto" and that kind of thing. There's two very clear, very different ways of approaching it. And you can have sophisticated or coarse versions of both.

**TH** So during Tudor lockdown, all the theatres closed down. There was a mixture of plagues and flu-like viruses. And they did exactly the same thing. All the shops were closed, there was no travelling, you would shut your house, the theatres closed for months on end, and all the theatre companies were buggered. But what did happen was that people like Shakespeare would write a lot of plays and come out of lockdown after six months with an amazing explosion of creativity. Is that going to happen in your lives or those of people you know?

**SP** I hope so. Our industry has been taken over by middle management. When we started, when you proposed your sitcom to the BBC there were two people. There was Jon Plowman, who produced *Ab Fab*; if you did a slightly camp, bells and whistles, bright-coloured clothes thing, you'd take it to him. And more naturalistic stuff you'd take to Geoffrey Perkins. They had the absolute say on what was commissioned and what went out. Whereas now if you want to get sitcom commissions, if you approach the BBC you have to go via six or seven people. And then the head of comedy will still have to sell it to the Channel. Or you'll go to an independent production company. There's just many, many, many more people to get the thing past. I think the more people that have to say yes to it, the fewer chances it has of being strange and wonderful. And they say things like, "This has to be more zeitgeisty." But we ought to be creating the zeitgeist. By the time you've made the programme 18 months down the line, the zeitgeist has passed. What's happening now is, although they're doing it very badly, people are taking control of [productions], they're making their own content. They had the *Isolation Song Contest*.



**TH** So there's going to be an explosion of creativity. People are getting on with it and doing it themselves?

**SP** I think people have a bit more courage. I'm definitely experimenting. Things you know you couldn't possibly sell, you now have time to develop them. I wanted to do a two-metre tango, socially distanced. I'm friends with Ed Watson at the Royal Ballet, but he lives too far away for us to meet up. So that ended up being a tap for carers, which I did with Steven McRae [principal dancer at the Royal Ballet]. I'm interested in the conversation between comedy and dance. They're both so rhythmic. And I wouldn't fancy my chances of pitching that to anybody, but in lockdown I can just send videos to dancers and they can send them back and we can see what happens. I hope I won't be alone in that, I hope people will be doing more outrageous things. It's changed things from "What can I sell?" to "What am I actually interested in?"

### John Lloyd

John Lloyd is a TV producer and writer. His credits include *Not The Nine O'Clock News*, *Blackadder*, *Spitting Image* and *QI*.



**TOM HODGKINSON** So tell me how your lock-down is going.

**JOHN LLOYD** There have been terrible moments that we've had like everybody does. But all those things you read in books, I really try to do. I really do wake up and think, "Oh my God I've got another whole day. This is unbelievable. I don't deserve this." I never thought I'd make 40.

**TH** Now John, you haven't always been in such a cheerful mood, have you?

**JL** I was known as Mr Grumpy for a long time in television. Or Terry Tension. "Oh, Terry Tension's in the room."

**TH** I suppose you were a perfectionist – was that why?

**JL** Here's the thing. There's a Freudian concept called infantile amnesia. My son Harry said this to me years ago when he was a young teenager. He said, "Dad, can you remember what I was like when I was two?" and I said, "Of course, like yesterday." And he goes, "Why can't I?" It's one of the central mysteries of being a human being – why can't you remember before you were two or three? And it's basically to protect psychiatrists' livelihoods because that's where all the damage happens. All the problems, unless you're actually brain-damaged, happen before you're two. And it's the engine that drives you. Whatever it was, all your resentments, your fears, in my case



obsessive perfectionism, fear of failure has all come from something somebody said to me when I was tiny. That's what hardwires you. That's the machinery that operates what the Chinese would call "the monkey mind" – the little man in your head that tells you what to do and think. I didn't want to be a producer, I wanted to be a performer and a writer. But I got offered a job by a man with a beard from the BBC and within three weeks I was completely obsessively hooked on the job. I found it was something I could really do. And I did that without a break for 15 years. I worked every weekend. I missed everybody's weddings. I just was completely driven. Then I met Sarah. We got married. We had a couple of kids. I won two lifetime awards in the same year – one from BAFTA and one from the Royal Television Society. And one Christmas Eve I woke up and I just couldn't see the point of anything in life. I'd done everything I'd set out to do. I'd won the prizes, made ridiculous amounts of money directing cheese commercials in the 1990s. And, you know, I had a nice car and a cottage in the country and I was absolutely bereft, for years. I sat just mainly crying and drinking a great deal of expensive malt whisky. And then I thought, "Ok, I've gotta dig myself out of this... I've got no reason to be unhappy [yet] I'm absolutely furious, resentful, angry and very depressed." And so I dug myself out of the pit. It took about ten years... I did it by basically learning to think for myself again and trying to find out about everything really. And *QI* is a kind of by-product of that search, literally the search for the meaning of life. I wanted to know what the point of being alive is. Is it something other than "He who dies with the most toys wins"? I'd never read any Plato. I thought philosophy was boring and pointless and too difficult for me. [But] when people go on about, "Oh, I'm an atheist" – well have you read the literature? Have you read the Bhagavad Gita? Have you read the Tao Te Ching? Have you read any of the Quran, for example? Have you actually read the Bible? And on what evidence do you base this "Well there's no evidence for God"? It's like people are going through life with a bag over their head. People are sleepwalking through life. And it's because of that little monkey in your head, the little chap. I can hear yours all chattering at me. I know your lips aren't moving but your monkey mind is talking 19 to the dozen: "Why won't this guy shut up, I thought he was going to be funny. Let's tune out. It's not as good as the last *Idler* when Mark Vernon did all the talking." All those things your internal monologue is saying. And that's actually not you. That's your puppeteer. It's the little self that controls your feelings and makes you unable to operate optimally. And the thing you need to try to reach, at least what I try to do, I've got a philosophy of my own, and it has only one commandment, which is



“Get out of the way”. And that means in everything you do, whether you’re a parent, a film director, or an editor, you remove yourself from the equation and things will go fine, thanks. It’s that we get in the way of ourselves. That’s what I think.

**TH** Now John, of all the things you’ve done, which did you enjoy the most? Which do you think caused the most joy in the world?

**JL** I go to work with no agenda. All I want is to emerge with something really good. And what is annoying about working with me is that I’ve only got two buttons – “terrific” and “not good enough”. I don’t have a “that’ll do” thing. So everything I do is extremely hard. Doing a lager commercial is just as hard as writing a press release or doing an episode of *Blackadder*. I give 110 per cent to everything, and it’s very painful for me. But the satisfaction of doing something... and because I know it’s not me – I’m just waiting until it gets to the excellent bit. I don’t take credit. You can’t take credit for anything except turning up and working really hard and not giving up. So they’ve all been – all those programmes – I think the most fun thing was *The Meaning Of Liff*, a book I wrote with Douglas Adams.

**TH** Yes, that’s before the book of things there aren’t words for, given words that are English towns.

**JL** Yes all the words are recycled place names. So for example Kettering in Northamptonshire: Kettering is in fact the marks left on your bottom and thighs after sunbathing on a wickerwork chair. Or Epping is the fruitless movements of forefingers and eyebrows when failing to attract the attention of a waiter or a barman.

**TH** Have any fantasy thoughts occurred to you over the last few weeks? Things you’d like to do? New projects?

**JL** Honestly, Tom, I’m so busy. I’ve got a thousand things to do. The most fun thing I’ve ever done in my life is managing my son’s band. They’re called Waiting For Smith. He’s got a video out called *Long Life*, which he shot and edited himself. People often say, quite wrongly, “John you’re a genius, a comedy genius.” I’m so not a genius. I’m not even close. Harry is a genius. He sits at the piano and these songs come out of his fingers and mouth from nowhere. He can teach himself anything in 20 minutes. I’m just really stubborn. I won’t give up. I’m insane, honestly, mentally deranged in my refusal to give up no matter how horrible things get. 🎧



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## Modern manners

# Take a bow

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*Goodbye handshakes! Marcel Theroux suggests a return to a less tactile and more courtly form of greeting*

THERE'S a glimmer of something on the horizon. Whether it's the rosy-fingered light of dawn or something less pleasant, it's hard to say. But clearly, as long as the lurking possibility of renewed infection remains with us, we're going to have to rethink some of our habits.

Now, when this whole coronavirus nightmare was in its infancy and seemed to be confined to China and northern Italy, but was largely sparing Thailand, I did wonder – in my scientifically unrigorous, arts graduate way – whether certain cultural norms contributed to its transmission. I was thinking specifically of my Italian-American relatives and the way they greet each other with an affectionate bear hug – at least, when they're on speaking terms. Could over-intimate modes of salutation – cuddles, hugs, kisses on each cheek – explain or have contributed to the high rates of infection experienced in Italy?

Well, no. That was cobblers. The virus has torn through the chilly British and the tactile Latins alike. Germany's low transmission rates are uncorrelated with Teutonic reserve and instead have everything to do with competent governance.

But it's still the case that hand-shaking, hugging and even standing too close to each other are fraught with peril. When we come out of lockdown and finally encounter old friends, relatives and new acquaintances, we're going to need something to get us through the first awkward moments of our encounters.

So I've got a suggestion. Let's bow. Yes, bow – like a courtier before a monarch, like *judokas* before a bout, like Japanese salarymen, like people bowing. You know, you've seen it.

There's certainly a precedent for an apparently outmoded piece of cultural baggage returning to the vanguard. Where was the @ sign before email made



it weirdly relevant? It was a useless vestige on a typewriter keyboard, as antiquated and pointless as ¶, which is itself surely on the verge of being repurposed as the symbol of a cutting-edge tech corporation, or the name of a hip-hop collective. Podcasts? My grandparents listened to them on the wireless. Wild swimming? They called it swimming. “TikTok” is the sound of obsolete clockwork. And let’s not get started on the resurrection of the Edwardian beard.

The bow, a gracious bend from the waist that gently works the abs and flexes the sacroiliac joint, that briefly lowers the status of the bower to salute its recipient and burns approximately four calories a time, is not just a greeting, it’s exercise! And it has a whole philosophical dimension: it’s a brief and therapeutic embrace of inferiority. It says, “You know, I’m not as important as all that.” And it invites the response, “No, and neither am I.”

Instead of some horrible bone-crunching handshake – a signal of the owner’s alpha status – what a relief, then, to incline your torsos humbly and symmetrically to one another, raise your glances to each other’s eyeline, and say, “My, it’s been a while.”

What’s more, you don’t have to worry about other people’s personal hygiene, there’s no need for alcohol hand rub, and it even gives you a handy rule of thumb for maintaining effective social distancing: if your heads touch, you’re too close. So start practising now. I feel this could catch on. 🎧

*Marcel Theroux is a novelist and broadcaster. His most recent novel is The Secret Books (Faber and Faber)*







Essay


# The productivity trap

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*Andrew Simms on how the pandemic might offer us the opportunity to fundamentally change the way we live and work*

PRODUCTIVITY is a bit like cleanliness: hard to argue against. “Could you be a bit less productive?” qualifies as sarcastic praise. But like cleanliness, you can have too much of a good thing. In the shadow of a viral pandemic we’re all well briefed on the importance of infection control, but the right amount of exposure to dirt is still, paradoxically, a boon to the immune system. Just as the right amount of idling could be vital to a healthy way of life.

**In lockdown, those who can work from home have been liberated from things like the expensive and life-sapping commute**



The great upheaval of the coronavirus outbreak could have dramatically divergent consequences on our working lives depending on the lessons we learn from it. One set of voices points to the economic damage caused by the lockdown of daily life, wrings its hands and speaks of the urgent need to return to normal, possibly with even harsher austerity and aggressive deregulation triggered by the scale of public financial support given to businesses and workers.

But other voices say that the crisis reveals exactly the opposite – our latent potential to rapidly change how we live, work and behave, and the possibilities to fundamentally rethink the economy. The cost of living is what keeps many people shackled to long hours serving a growth-addicted system. But in lockdown, many of those who can work from home have been liberated from things like the expensive and life-sapping commute. People quickly adapted to the idea that a lot of moving around was so much “unnecessary travel”. More widely the notion of focusing just on “essential goods and services” has



simplified things and cut much superfluous and environmentally burdensome consumption.

In its place has emerged a flourishing patchwork of homemade entertainments, making, baking and reconnecting socially online, including singing in community choirs. Importantly, a new awareness has grown of the role played by key workers. The very opposite of the jobs that normally get all the attention (City workers, publicity-hungry CEOs and celebrities), the occupations that now draw our applause (many of them poorly paid) are the health and care workers, the people who keep public transport going, those who clean and maintain our neighbourhoods, and the shop workers who stack shelves with food.

Things have flipped, and almost the last concern is how to make more general stuff to fuel debt-financed consumerism. If anything the focus has been on how to switch manufacturing from more frivolous matters to important things like medical and protective equipment. Hence brewers have been producing hand gel, fashion labels switching to medical gowns and even Formula 1 engineers taking on the challenge of making breathing aids. But the siren call to hurry back to the old, unequal, environmentally destructive “normal” is sounding out strong from the camps of the bosses and its drum beat is the insistence on increasing productivity.

However, getting under the skin of why productivity – what all modern economies strive for – might not always be a good idea requires a little more effort. To virtually all economists and commentators it seems innately good.

Yet, as is often the case, that which claims to be the height of common sense often turns out to be a far more recent invention, and typically is found in the service of a certain set of interests and a particular order. The idea of economic growth, still promoted today as a kind of panacea for all society’s ills, was only invented as a national accounting device in the 1930s, and didn’t become a political obsession until much later.

The notion of productivity has a longer history, but not much. You might think it had been common currency for at least as long as there have been tax-hungry monarchs and wealth-accumulating corporations. But if you search the written record, the term barely registers in published English until around 1890. It then enjoys a fairly meteoric rise in popularity, peaking in the 1980s. (By contrast, references to “idling” have been in use for centuries.)

Given that productivity is about getting more from less, it shouldn’t surprise anyone that the term is joined at the historical hip with capitalism.



## The rise and fall of productivity?

Having fewer people produce more goods and services is seen as a fundamental efficiency from which profit and a rise in living standards can flow. But in a world of finite resources and in which paid employment is seen as an essential part of citizenship, a desire for relentlessly rising productivity can run into problems.

### **People end up serving the economy rather than the economy serving people**

Firstly, the drive for productivity has immediate human consequences. The mills and factories of the industrial revolution were synonymous with human suffering and led to the rise of the Labour movement. The specialisation and repetitive nature of work within them spawned a whole literature on alienation. These dynamics have, in places, been ameliorated, but have never gone away. Finance-driven markets relentlessly seek greater productivity, and the rise of the “precariat” – those in precarious employment who live in the shadow of poorly accountable outsourcing and zero-hour contracts – is just the latest manifestation of how people end up serving the economy rather than the economy serving people.

A 2015 *New York Times* exposé of retail leviathan Amazon referred to staff being subjected to late-night emails that were expected to be answered, and frequent performance meetings where workers had to justify their performances against a dizzying array of metrics – sometimes reportedly 50–60 pages long. Then there was the company’s Anytime Feedback Tool, with which employees were encouraged to give “secret feedback” on their colleagues (a mechanism described by workers as a “river of intrigue and scheming”). The paper also reported that there was what it described as an “annual cull” of staff, and that it was commonplace for workers to be reduced to tears.

Any argument that great public benefit arises from the success of corporations like Amazon because of the tax revenue they raise is undermined by the fact that Amazon was found (by tax transparency advocates Fair Tax Mark) to be the worst offender for “aggressively avoiding” tax, paying only around a third of the headline tax rate in the US over the course of a decade. No wonder its boss Jeff Bezos is the world’s richest man.

Using productivity as an excuse to run companies and services in a certain way has consequences that reach into every area of our lives. In the UK the



threat of strikes hangs over the London Underground as, in the face of funding cuts, management tries to get more from less, extending the tube service by introducing night trains while making cuts to ticket office staff and changing timetables. Fearing a combination of a less safe network due to reduced staff at stations and more anti-social shifts for train drivers, a dispute is raging between unions and management over the “intolerable” stress placed on staff.

**The message seems to be that your best chance of success is to make your life and soul available for unlimited extractive mining**

So far, perhaps, so familiar for the kind of human wear and tear at the core of the Anglo-Saxon economic systems in the US and UK, where competitive individualism and accumulation are emphasised. The future of work is vulnerable, and the message seems to be that your best chance of success is to make your life and soul available for unlimited extractive mining. But productivity raises other fundamental problems, both for the services that hold together the fabric of society, and for the biosphere which holds together the fabric of life.

If politicians want productivity to continue rising, they’re faced with a trade-off between creating large-scale structural unemployment, or seeing the climate emergency and economic pressures driving a mass extinction event inexorably worsen. Why? It works like this.

As noted, in capitalist economies investors demand more from less, and the way they do this is by increasing productivity. To get their returns, if a factory employing 10 people produces 100 widgets in one year, the following year, depending on how demanding the investor is, they might expect the income from production of 108 widgets, or 115 or 120.

But, if ecological limits kick in, which they currently are, and it’s not possible to produce more than 100 widgets a year, and nothing else changes, in order to still get the expected return on investment, instead they would expect the 100 widgets to cost less to produce, and so be the work of only nine people, and then eight, and so on. An endlessly expanding economy can mask this problem simply by having more people producing ever more goods and services. Faced with a climate crisis and ecological emergency that is not an option

At this point a common question is to ask whether efficiency gives us a get-out-of-jail-free card. Can’t we carry on as before with a bit more efficiency?



Firstly, the laws of physics limit how far you can go down that path. And the brutal reality is that with all the technological progress we're enjoying, humanity's use of stuff, materials, is still going up. It rose eight per cent in just two years while our re-use and recycling of resources fell. Growth and productivity drowns out efficiency.

If you want the economy to squeeze back within safe, planetary boundaries, productivity growth creates a huge problem. If the scale of the economy stabilises, or reduces, but investors still expect rising productivity from a workforce – more from less – the pressure is in one direction: to produce the same output with fewer workers. All else being equal, unemployment rises along with productivity. But unemployment is bad for people's well-being, socially divisive and leads to economic instability.

How can the productivity trap be tackled? We already live with something like this problem. It's known as Baumol's cost disease and, delightfully, the health service is a good illustration of it. Named after the American economist William Baumol, who coined the idea in the 1960s, in sectors like manufacturing, fairly open to mechanisation, the costs of labour can be lowered easily by replacing people with machines. But, where human contact is central to the job being done, as in the case of a nursery school teacher, speech therapist or nurse, it is much harder.

Of course technology can assist, but you can't leave a class of 32 seven-year-olds alone in front of a computer monitor and just let them get on with it, just because the school management might want to "increase the productivity" of their teachers. We would call that bad-quality education, not highly productive schooling.

Or imagine a health care worker has a patient who can't communicate easily. If they're having difficulties swallowing food at mealtimes, the carer may need to sit and watch them for half an hour to understand the nature of the problem. Haste would be counterproductive and lead potentially to a wrong diagnosis. Similarly there are tasks that are fairly immune to productivity growth. Baumol gave the illustration that while concert ticket prices may have changed in the past 200 years, a Mozart string quartet still requires the same number of players and the same amount of time to play that it did when first performed in the 18th century. Speeding the music up might be an amusing experiment, but it does not necessarily make for a more valuable musical experience.

What this means is that relative to other sectors of the economy where costs are more easily lowered by rising labour productivity, in areas like health and education it is intrinsically more difficult, and their costs rise in



comparison. This is the reason behind many erroneous allegations of public sector inefficiency, requiring the “discipline of the market” to correct it. It is one reason why outsourced care services have spectacularly failed, and why care workers are placed under unreasonable expectations at work. The same dynamic affects the whole of what get called “personal services”, which might be anything from hairdressing to plumbing, or someone bringing food to your table in a restaurant.

A whole range of services are inescapably more labour-intensive. From one perspective this creates a problem for those defending labour-intensive public services, from another it is an opportunity to turn ideas of productivity upside down. It becomes possible to re-imagine the economy in such a way that a fall in classic productivity could mean a rise in quality of service and efficiency of outcome.

### **Keynes famously imagined a liberation from work, with the working week falling to just 15 hours**

In his book, *The Skeptical Economist*, Jonathan Aldred puts it like this: “In so far as service quality is defined in terms of low labour productivity, productivity improvements are impossible without quality reductions.” This verdict goes equally for the overstretching of ecological assets through applying the “efficiency (and productivity) of industry” to nature.

A recent review of research on productivity growth did indeed find that it led to “poorer quality care being provided and thus poorer health outcomes”, heightened “job insecurity” associated with “poorer wellbeing”, as well as rising carbon emissions and degraded ecological systems.

These are important insights and suggest a vital advantage for the green economy. Its long-standing mantra of “repair, reduce, reuse, recycle” is a charter for a more labour-rich service economy, requiring far more enterprises built on human interaction and relationships. There are examples from banking to recycling, the rise of refurbishing, urban farming, community-based renewable energy and shared transport, where the intelligent return of a human element to the economy, together with new ideas about how better to share the amount of work available, point toward a positive escape from the productivity trap.

Keynes once famously imagined that the fruits of rising productivity would be shared and reaped in a liberation from work, with the norm of the working week falling to just 15 hours – the dream of true idlers. What happened



instead was that productivity growth was cashed-in as rising consumption and the spectacular accumulation of wealth by those at the top of the income pile.

According to economists Tim Jackson and Professor Peter Victor: “Either we can reduce the average hours worked per employee or else we can shift the structural composition of the economy to sectors which have lower labour productivity and lower (possibly even negative) labour productivity growth.” Having more people in work but working fewer hours, for example, would give a larger share of the population the social and economic benefits of employment. It would also have the advantage of lowering overall consumption in rich countries. People who work less tend to consume less for a number of reasons, such as being more time-rich than cash-rich, with more time to do things for themselves, and being driven less hard by the culture of long hours toward superfluous consumption. Add that insight to other beneficial changes and the future looks better. Compared to fossil fuels and centralised power generation, for example, an energy system based on a variety of small to large-scale renewable energy technologies creates between two and four times the number of jobs.

Stepping away from our addictions to growth and productivity points us instead towards activities that create relatively more jobs, and which are themselves building a greener, less wasteful economy. Taking time over things to do them well, what might be called idling, might just be the secret of greater quality of life, a more inclusive, caring economy and a planet we can all thrive together on.

For anyone who might feel wary about applying any of the lessons from the coronavirus lockdown, it turns out there’s much more than just a metaphorical connection between that and the climate emergency. Many climate campaigners fought shy of stressing links but as time passed more literal connections emerged such as a strong and direct link between air pollution from economic activity and higher death rates from Covid19. The UN Environment Programme revealed, too, the many environmental factors involved in increasing zoonoses – diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans. That means both push factors and preventive action for pandemics and climate breakdown are clearly linked. Connections like this mean we should be taking the foot off the productivity pedal and thinking about what really matters. The striking traffic reduction during the lockdown not only cut contagion, but meant fewer deaths from respiratory disease and less pressure on the climate. The virus is unambiguously tragic, but it has also offered us a reset button. 🔄





Cicero had several villas in which to indulge his love of otium  
[photo:Tom Hodgkinson, National Archaeological Museum of Naples]



## Essay

# Roman holiday

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John Davie on how, in ancient Rome, having plenty of free time could be a mixed blessing.

WOULD the Romans have made good idlers? The key word here is *otium*, which we translate, not perfectly, as “leisure”. It’s worth noticing that it’s the opposite of the Latin word *negotium*, which we usually understand as “employment” in the sense of “business occupation”. The related verb *negotari*, from which we get “negotiate”, is mainly used to mean “to do business”, say of the wholesale or banking variety.

Of course, work can be a chore and we’d much rather have time to devote to our hobbies – travelling, watching live football, playing golf – all the different pursuits we’re banned from enjoying in these dismal days.

A secondary sense of *negotium* for the Romans was “trouble” or “difficulty”; if you made *negotium* for someone you made their life awkward and they wouldn’t thank you for it.

It all came down to money and whether you possessed it or not. The top level of society was the nobility (*optimates*), aristocratic landowners who held the highest political offices during the Republic. Then came the equestrian order, the “knights” – less moneyed but increasingly influential – who were the businessmen oiling the wheels of commerce (*equites*). Beneath these two affluent classes were the commoners (*plebs*), the illiterate tradesmen rebuked for loitering by the Pompeian tribune at the start of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.

At the bottom of the pile were the slaves (*servi*) usually of foreign extraction and in origin prisoners of war who’d been marched to the city in their thousands in the wake of the Roman conquest of the East. Here we come back to the concept of *otium*, for it was this slave economy that underpinned everything the Romans achieved in peace and in war.

Outnumbering their masters considerably, slaves had to be kept in a constant state of fear and obedience. By carrying out all of Rome’s laborious



and unpleasant tasks, they gave their owners the priceless gift of leisure – time to enjoy the good things in life. There's little doubt that part of the reason why the Greeks and Romans achieved as much as they did in terms of history, philosophy, art and literature was that the institution of slavery freed them up to think and create. Without their contribution to western thought there would have been nothing to be rediscovered in 16th century Italy and, as we all know, so much of what we take for granted in the arts today derives from the Renaissance.

This leisure took different forms depending on social class. The common people thronged to see the (often obscene and never highbrow) mime on stage; the thrilling spectacle of chariot-racing in the circus; and above all the violence and cruelty of gladiatorial combat in the arena, prefaced by the midday execution of criminals.

### **We have to accept that the surviving records were written by men who lived privileged lives**

The poets and writers who gave us Latin literature were invariably men of some means, whether inherited or channelled through the gifts of patrons. As in the world of Beethoven's Vienna, genuine talent was recognised by aristocrats, themselves men of taste and educated in Greek literature, and the opportunity was given to favoured artists to showcase their work before a privileged and discerning audience. All of this implies considerable *otium* for poets and patrons alike.

But leisure was something of a double-edged sword. The closest I think we can get to the real sense of *otium* for the Romans is “not having anything pressing/important/financially necessary to do”. If popular entertainment is available in any society, boredom will not be a problem for some; if intellectual stimulation is present, those in search of it will likewise have their taste satisfied. In one of his most famous poems, Catullus – who occasionally pleaded poverty but was far from penniless – offers a very personal translation of a poem by the Greek poetess Sappho that describes the impact on him of watching the woman he loves sitting chatting to another man, perhaps her husband. The final stanza breaks new ground as the poet addresses himself and diagnoses his own ailment, as if he were a doctor:

*Otium*, Catullus, is what troubles you; *otium* is what gives you delight and makes you a slave to passion; *otium* has brought ruin on kings in former times and on prosperous cities, too.



The precise sense of *otium* here is not easy to pin down and some have thought the problematic stanza belongs to a different poem. But perhaps we have two Catulluses here: the lover in the bulk of the poem, and the poet (the “real” Catullus) in the final stanza, who tells himself he is his own worst enemy – he loves with such intensity that it has robbed him of his health. Perhaps we have here Catullus the idler who is suffering from the effect that his idleness is having on his behaviour. We know he came from Verona in the far north of Italy, where old-fashioned values and respect for traditional virtues prevailed. If the identification of this woman he calls “Lesbia” with the beautiful Clodia, wife of Metellus, is correct, he was dealing with a woman of decidedly untraditional values for whom love was a game, not to be taken too seriously. So perhaps he’s taking himself to task for being a bad Roman, someone who has let idleness make him self-indulgent, turning his back on the proper concerns of a Roman, such as making a contribution to public life. In practice this meant entering into a political career or joining the army, the unequalled fighting machine that had brought such prestige and wealth to the Roman people.

There’s a scene in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* where the love-struck Berowne bows low to the fair Rosaline and says: “O! I am yours, and all that I possess!” Her reply is: “All the fool mine?” Catullus, like Berowne, has been reduced to a fool by his excess of passion.

We need to remember that the only reason we know so much about the Greeks and Romans is that, unlike other early societies, they wrote a great deal about themselves. But we know less than we might think, for classical literature is invariably written from an aristocratic standpoint. Without graffiti and occasional inscriptions we would know very little of the common man and his thoughts. As such, it is the moneyed classes we have to consider for a picture of Roman leisure-time. More than that, we have to accept that the surviving records were written by men of literary talent who lived for the most part privileged lives, either in their own right or (like Beethoven) as recipients of wealthy patronage. With this in mind, we can now look at how such privileged Romans passed the hours as the beneficiaries of *otium*.

The pattern of the day was simple. After a suitably late rise, mornings were spent giving audiences to one’s *clientes* (financial dependants). Then, around midday, a visit to the baths for recreation, but also to have a relaxed discussion with men of similar status, to further business and social interests, and to enjoy gossip (the equivalent of a gentlemen’s club, in many ways). At around 3pm (“the ninth hour”) came the main meal of the day, which was taken with one’s family and lasted (as in France today) several hours.



Evenings were for listening to the cultured voice of a Greek servant, whether singing or reading poetry aloud, or for entertaining friends over wine.

Such was the *otium* of the successful Roman. But it was also an important part of one's success to own several villas in desirable parts of Italy or, for the seriously rich, abroad. At Piazza Armerina in central Sicily there's a vast villa with sumptuous mosaic floors whose owner must have been of considerable wealth, perhaps a member of the Imperial family. Cicero, the doyen of the Roman Bar, is known to have had several villas in Italy, the recompense from grateful clients. Pliny the Younger, another successful lawyer, and the Augustan poet Horace both describe themselves taking pleasure in riding around their estates and playing the role of gentleman farmer.

**“Cicero, the doyen of the Roman Bar, is known to have had several villas in Italy, the recompense from grateful clients”**

Where did these ancient idlers take themselves to escape the heat, dust and odours of the capital in the summer months, when the *sirocco* made life particularly unpleasant? One of the favourite locations was the Bay of Naples, then as now a place of outstanding natural beauty. We know that Antium (modern Anzio) was a great favourite with Roman emperors, especially Nero, who was born there and chose it, lovingly, as the backdrop to his first (unsuccessful) attempt to kill his interfering mother.

In the vicinity was the notorious town of Baiae, where many well-to-do Romans had villas, and where, with a more carefree kind of *otium* in mind, they went to spend the summer months. Cicero gives us a picture of how they passed the time in a celebrated speech in defence of a young man prosecuted for murder. The charge had been brought by a woman with whom the young man had spent many hours of pleasure, both in Rome and at Baiae, and whom he had finally tired of – quite possibly the same woman who'd caused Catullus such torment, the lady Clodia.

This is how Cicero characterises the *demi-monde* of the Bay of Naples for the titillation of his audience:

As for you, madam, you will have to give an account of orgies, flirtations, misconduct, trips to Baiae, beach parties, dinner parties, drinking parties, musical entertainments and concerts, boating picnics.



The point Cicero is making is that *otium* should belong to private life, but is being flaunted by Clodia and her wealthy friends. She is in effect living the life of a prostitute and as such her testimony has no validity in a Roman court of law. The fact that she was a member of one of the most blue-blooded families in Rome must have made the trial all the more fascinating to an audience of ordinary citizens.

Baiae was regarded as a place where, morally, anything went. The poet Propertius is seriously worried by the news that his girlfriend has gone to spend a few days there, calling it “corrupt” and a place “whose shores will separate many a couple” as it is “an enemy to girls who care who they sleep with”.

*Otium* in poetry written under the emperor Augustus came to have a new connotation, that of inner tranquillity. Earlier still, in the final years of the Republic, it was often coupled with the word *dignitas* (“worth/merit; honourable employment; value/excellence”). The third sense is the relevant one here, hence *otium cum dignitate*: “honourable leisure”, the aspiration, surely, of every idler.

Aristotle had written that we should all aspire to excellence and indeed make it a habit in our daily lives. Not every idler is capable of this, and certainly not the writer of this article, but it is undoubtedly something to aim at. The question is: what is excellence in terms of how we spend the gladsome hour that the Romans called *otium*? I honestly don’t know. But what I think is incontestable is that a society which does not prepare people for the use of leisure is less than healthy.

We find ourselves in strange times when the borders of our experience are supposed to be the walls of our home. What better time to delve into the delights of *otium*? This, however, is when the phrase *otium cum dignitate* comes back to haunt us. Why did the Romans feel the need to qualify *otium* in this way? It’s surely because they knew Catullus hadn’t been entirely wrong to use the word in the sense of “idleness”. Here is the paradox inherent in *otium*: we all welcome the notion of relaxation from the pressures of everyday life, but are also aware it can be an escape from responsibility, an excuse for self-indulgence. Where’s that corkscrew?

“*Otium*, Catullus, is what troubles you ...” 🍷







# Country life: July

## Idler's almanack

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Tom Hodgkinson *writes on the joys of hand tools and provides a calendar of jobs to do – and fun to be had – in the month of July, in this extract from his self-sufficiency manual, Brave Old World, published in 2012*

### In praise of the scythe

In medieval calendars, the images for June and July show happy peasants using the scythe to cut down the hay. Unlike the lonely modern farmer who spends all day (and sometimes all night) alone in a tractor cutting and making hay, the Old World used convivial teams of scythemen to mow the meadows. And hand tools are still commonly used in Old World countries today: I remember my initial shock upon seeing, in Mexico, groups of men cutting the grass by the roadside with sickles. The equivalent in the UK is to see groups of young men by the motorway with strimmers. The Mexican way seemed almost absurdly primitive, but then I began to reflect more deeply on this scene, and the fact is that, with a hand tool, the user is given a far greater degree of liberty. The Mexicans were all able to stop for a few moments to wipe their brows and look around them. Without the loud whine of the strimmer, they could chat to each other. They could sharpen their tools in situ. I also noticed that they were smiling. And while it is difficult to gauge what sort of expression their English counterparts wear, because they are loaded with protective armour, I doubt very much that they are smiling.

Having used a strimmer many times, I can testify that it does not encourage a cheerful countenance but rather an attitude of stressful gloom. As is often the case with machinery, the fun is removed from the job and the workman is reduced to a robotic functionary. The noise of the machine bores into your head – it is, literally, boring – and the vibrations pass through your hands into your whole body. The nylon string tends to get caught up in itself, so you have to take frequent breaks for untangling, and it runs out of petrol quickly.



The machine requires a great deal of maintenance, and must be filled with petrol and a measure of the right sort of oil. It is also expensive and breaks down easily. I have two in my barn; the first one broke.

Now compare the scythe. Its first great advantage over the strimmer is its great beauty. I bought mine from Simon Fairlie, editor of *The Land* magazine and founder of the Tinker's Bubble woodland community in Somerset. The scythes he sells consist of a long curved blade attached to a wooden handle. The blades are hand-forged in Austria by Schröckenfux, established in 1540. The handle has two bits of wood to grab hold of, and the whole seems to have been designed with a wonderful knowledge of the human body: when you pick one up, it feels like the most natural thing in the world. Fairlie cites Ivan Illich's comment in *Tools for Conviviality*, where Illich writes of the need for tools which "allow men to achieve purposes with energy fully under their control". To hold a scythe for the first time is rather like holding a gold coin for the first time: it feels right. In the case of the gold coin, the first time you hold one you have the sense of holding real money and not some confusing fiction cooked up by the bankers.

So when you pick up a scythe, you are returned to a sense of harmony between man and technology. Rather like the book, the scythe is a brilliant piece of technology which simply cannot be improved upon. Yes, man tries with his strimmers and Kindles, but all rely on oil or electricity, and all are awkward, expensive and just feel wrong.

The action of the scythe is a rhythmic swing from side to side. There are some beautiful videos on YouTube which demonstrate the technique. I am a mere amateur but once or twice I have felt that I have swung the scythe correctly, which has been deeply satisfying. Every few minutes, you stop to sharpen the blade. Hanging from your belt is a little brass water-holder, and in it sits your sharpening stone. You can see the little pouch in pictures of medieval scythemen, and indeed in photographs of teams of English meadow mowers (the scythe was still being used until the 1970s in many parts of England). With your scythe, you can hear the "fowlis synge" as you work, which is another advantage over the strimmer.

Come July, my parents-in-law have their Somerset meadow mown by the very Simon Fairlie who sold me my scythe. By good fortune, they have a cottage in the closest village to Tinker's Bubble. When those low-impact dwellers first arrived, my parents-in-law, in common with the majority of the villagers, were afraid of Tinker's Bubble, and even campaigned against it, fearing, I suppose, an influx of drug-soaked wasters. But over the years, they have come to recognise that Tinker's Bubble is in fact an Old World settle-



ment. The people living on it are bringing back the old ways, such as using horse-drawn carts, and they make a significant cultural and practical contribution to the community, as well as appearing charming to those who can remember when scything a field was a perfectly normal practice. Tinker's Bubble brings romance to the village.

Now, the other important point about muscle power is that it is free, drains no resources and is health-giving. Scything, walking and cycling create no carbon footprint. They render carbon offsets and expensive visits to the gymnasium completely unnecessary. They promote strength and vitality.

### **Muscle power is free, drains no resources and is health-giving**

Mr Fairlie recently produced a special edition of *The Land* themed around the issue of muscle power, which he called “the neglected renewable resource”. He rightly points out that using a hand tool can be a meditative act, and reminds us that teams of mowers with scythes would sing together, which is a beautiful thought. Another advantage of a well-made tool (and the common craft worker's lament is that “the old tools were better”) is that it can be maintained with ease at home and it will last for ever. The problem with modern machinery is that it breaks and needs to be upgraded. You have to buy the new, improved version. It is far cheaper to stick with the hand tool or, in other words, the old, unimprovable version.

Large numbers of people can do amazing things without the help of machinery: *The Land* gives the example of an Amish barn-raising: a team of 35 men and boys build and paint a gigantic barn in a single day without the use of power tools. The Amish are indeed an example of an Old World community thriving in the midst of the New World.

Fairlie also includes an excellent article on the contemporary use of horses in agriculture. Again, these need no oil, and of course they produce vast amounts of useful manure. The magazine also contains an account of how the hard-working ox came back to Cuba. In 1992, during the 1990–2000 “special period” when the country was cut off from an oil supply, the government introduced an animal traction strategy. Cuban writer Roberto Sánchez Medina, writing in *The Land*, explains that the Cuban crisis has now eased off as a result of a supply of Venezuelan oil, but that animal traction is still being used, and should be investigated by other countries:



The increasing scarcity of oil and the rising price of fossil fuels will make animal traction an important issue in years to come. Oxen and horses, unlike oil-powered tractors, are able to produce more oxen and horses, which can be used or sold. When they die, unlike tractors, they rot into the soil and feed the earth.

In the same way, you will still happily be mowing your lawn with your scythe when all the oil has run out. We can safely say the scythe has been perfected. It is Old World technology and simply could not be made better. The scythe will still be in use a thousand years from now, but can we say the same of the strimmer?

### **On making hay**

July is also the month for making hay, that is, cutting and drying grass to store as winter feed for the animals. In the old days, hay-making was a joyous affair, with all the men and boys putting in long days in the sun, drinking ale and cider and indulging in country sports. Nowadays, hay-making is a question of getting the tractors and bailers out and going flat out when the weather is dry. Farmers put in very long days when making hay, because you have to make the most of every ounce of sunshine. And although the process is mechanised, the old joy still remains. You can see the pleasure on the faces of the farmers when the hay-making is complete and their barns are piled high with sweet-smelling bales. No, mechanisation has not spoilt the pleasures entirely, but clearly the fun of working in a large team has been lost. Harvest time was also when casual labourers were employed, and it is worth reflecting that, for all the sterling efforts of the trade unions to bring in year-round wages and fixed employment via the invention of the full-time job, something has been lost. Casual day labour suited itinerants and idlers, the masterless men. It also suited farmers who did not want to commit themselves to paying wages all year round. "I don't like employing people," says one farmer near me. "There's too much bureaucratic headache."

Some years ago I conducted a hay-making experiment. A friend and I cut the long grass with a scythe and heaped it up in two long lines, two feet apart. These are called furrows. The idea was that I would turn each furrow over several times a day so that the grass would eventually dry all the way through. Well, I'm afraid I forgot. Then it rained. I waited for a dry day. One came, and I turned the furrows over. But then it rained again. It was clear that I was never going to get this damp grass transformed into hay. So I gave up and piled it next to the compost bins. It seems that you really do have to make hay



while the sun shines. One afternoon of procrastination, and all your work is wasted. My animals could have starved. Let us repeat the wisdom of the poet: *labor omnia vicit*. However, in the process, I did catch a glimpse of the pure joy of working with grass and a scythe. The furrows that are produced are actually very beautiful to look at. There are also the delicious fresh scents which fill the air. And you can hear the birds sing and the cattle low. Self-sufficiency guru John Seymour has this advice about hay:

Good weather is absolutely all important... the old-fashioned method was to turn the swathes by hand either with a pitch fork or a wooden rake, according to taste. As you turn them over, fluff them up... Then, when you are sure it is dry enough, the old idea was to cock it. Pile it up into little mini-stacks higher than a man and dome-shaped. Let it dry in the cock until the green has really gone out of it... when it is dry you can cart it and stack it.

So let us praise the noble scythe and rediscover the joy of making hay, and when our work is done, let us stretch out in the meadows, release Bacchus from his glassy cage, and enjoy the fruits of our labour. Let us re-create this charming scene from the end of Book II of the *Georgics*:

*Ipse dies agitat festos fususque per herbam,  
ignis ubi in medio et socii cratera coronant,  
te libans, Lenaeae, vocat pecorisque magistris  
velocis iaculi certamina ponit in ulmo,  
corporaque agresti nudant prædura palæstrae.*

[The master himself keeps holiday, and stretched out on the grass, with a fire in the midst and his comrades wreathing the bowl, offers libation and calls upon you, god of the wine press, and for the keepers of the flock sets up a mark on an elm for the contest of the winged javelin, or they bare their arms for the rustic wrestling bout.]

– *Georgics*, Book II, ll.527–31

## July's jobs

So July is about mowing and making hay. It is when the Dogstar rises and, at this time, the grim Hesiod tells you to “set your slaves to winnowing Demeter’s holy grain”. Palladius tells us to sow onions, radish, lettuce, beet and turnips.

The principal job to remember for July is to plant your brassicas, as



Cobbett, in *The English Gardener*, reminds us: “Plant celery, endive, lettuces, cabbages, leeks, savoys, broccoli, greencale, cauliflowers.” Seymour says similar: “You may well be engaged in planting out your brassicas. It’s not too late. Keep on with the radish and lettuce plantings, of course. Sow a seed bed with spring cabbage.”

Your kale, broccoli and cabbage plants should be planted two feet apart. They should also be protected from the wind, and staked as they grow. I failed in these simple tasks, and the result was very poor growth. I also planted the plants too late, in August or September. I nearly always, in addition, forget to sow a seedbed. Therefore, come planting time, I have no plants. So I go down to the nursery or the market (never to the evil gardening centre) and buy good plants from local growers. The brassica plants will be planted where the beans and early potatoes used to be. Make sure to put a net over them to deter the cabbage butterflies. They lay thousands of eggs, and the caterpillars which hatch from them can be a real pest.

### July’s merriment

There was not a huge amount of merriment in July in the Old World, as this was a busy month in the fields. However, July was traditionally the time for apple bobbing. Get a large tub and fill it with water. Bung a load of apples into it. Get everyone to kneel down beside the tub, their hands behind their back. The object is to lean forward and remove an apple with your teeth. Hilarious results ensue.

### July’s calendar

- 10 July Birthday of John Calvin, 1509, and not a day for celebration in any way at all.
- 15 July St Swithin’s Day. Swithin was an English monk and Bishop of Winchester. He died in 863. In 971, his bones were transferred to Winchester cathedral. The legend that the weather on St Swithin’s Day will determine the conditions over the following 40 days has been convincingly proved to be complete hokum.
- 22 July Feast day of St Mary Magdalen, patron saint of pharmacists, hairdressers, repentant sinners and prostitutes.
- 25 July St James’s Day. St James is the patron saint of Spain, and his feast day traditionally marks the start of the oyster season.
- 27 July Feast day of St Joseph of Arimathea, who died in AD82 and is commemorated at Glastonbury. 🍷



# Country life: August

## All to gather now

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Tom Hodgkinson *on how not to come a cropper in the harvesting season, being an edited extract from Brave Old World*

IN the Old World, August was the great month for the harvest, and of course it still is. The medieval calendars show gardeners merrily cutting wheat with the sickle. The Elizabethan ballad *The Mery Life Of The Countriman*, quoted by Ronald Hutton in *The Stations Of The Sun*, celebrates the romantic pleasures of the harvest:

*When corne is ripe, with tabor and pipe, their sickles they prepare;  
And wagers they lay how mucche in a day they meane to cut down there.  
And he that is quickest, and cutteth downe cleanest the corne,  
A garlande trime they make for him, and bravely they bring him home.*

The other main crop to harvest at this time of year is the grape. The Roman books on husbandry such as those by Columella and Cato offer endless pages on the proper care of vines and vineyards. Readers, then as now, were encouraged to grow their own rather than buy in from outside. The stern husbandry guru Varro, writing in 37BC, attacked what we would call globalisation and the retreat from the countryside:

*As therefore in these days practically all the heads of families have sneaked within the walls, abandoning the sickle and the plough, and rather [than] busy their hands... in the grain-fields and the vineyards, we hire a man to bring us from Africa and Sardinia the grain with which to fill our stomachs, and the vintage we store comes from the islands of Cos and Chios.*

So it is today: we would rather go to the supermarket and drink cans of Stella Artois in front of the television than break the clods in our allotment with the unrelenting mattock, grow barley and brew our own beer. We



import from elsewhere the things that we could make or grow ourselves and, like helpless children, follow a vain, costly, pleasure-seeking path through life, moving from emptiness to distraction.

Complete self-sufficiency, though, is neither possible nor desirable. Clearly, there needs to be a mixture of local and global trade. We love our St Emilion, our pepper, our lemons, our Persian rugs. You cannot make everything for yourself.

Now, this was a debate that also raged in the early 18th century. *The Spectator* essays promoted civilised, urban values and teased backwards-looking rural Tory squires. Addison and Steele, authors of the periodical, were Whigs – or what we might call modernisers, neophytes, progressives, liberals – who were very much in love with their own cleverness. And, rather like today's cynics, they delighted in pointing out inconsistencies in the arguments of their rural-minded opponents. In the essay *A Fox-Hunting Gentleman*, Addison, on a ramble through the country, meets a bluff and fiercely anti-Whig Tory squire:

After supper, he asked me if I was an admirer of punch; and immediately called for a sneaker. I took this occasion to insinuate the advantages of trade, by observing to him, that water was the only native of England that could be made use of on this occasion: but that the lemons, the brandy, the sugar, and the nutmeg were all foreigners.

### **Waste not**

At harvest time, it is all too easy to waste food. One gardener I met at a grand household complained that much of his work went in the bin. “I bring it in,” he said of his lovingly cultivated garden produce. “They throw it away.” When growing vegetables, we need to develop good habits when it comes to using the food that comes from the garden. This is an art that takes time and experience to master, particularly for those of us who are accustomed to “running to the markets”, to use a phrase from Cobbett, for every little thing.

### **Peas**

When living on a farm, I had great success with a variety called Alderman, which grows up to six feet tall. We also tried Hatif d'Annonay, Serpette Guilloteau and Telephone. Peas should be harvested as frequently as possible, because the more you pick, the more they grow. The plant tries its best to do its job, which is to produce as many potential new pea plants as possible. If you keep frustrating its efforts by picking pods of all sizes, it will



renew its efforts. Peas can be eaten directly from the pod, and children love them. The husk of the pod can be left to rot back into the earth or flung on the compost heap.

### **Root vegetables**

Carrot, beetroot, turnip and radish can all be brought into the house during the summer. The turnip is much under-rated. It is easy to grow, delicious, versatile, and has an attractive medieval quality about it. There are a number of varieties to try. When it comes to the beetroot, with its large crinkly seed, try a nice Italian variety such as Sangina. There is a whole world of beetroot husbandry out there, and London restaurants offer beetroot salads using multiple varieties. I predict that the same happy fate awaits the humble turnip: that this excellent root will become fashionable in the metropolitan eateries, and that gardeners will begin to explore unusual varieties. What starts as a backyard project for fun today could turn into a serious restaurant-supply business tomorrow. Carrots are another good-value crop, if you get it right. This year I had my first ever success with them, and one packet of seeds, costing about a quid, has given us two to three months' supply.

### **Fruit**

Now is the time to harvest your gooseberries and blueberries. So much easier than strawberries. Apple trees are miraculous. They are easy to look after, pretty, and each year they offer a heavier crop. The first thing you should do when you move to a new house is plant an apple tree. And when you consider that the cost of an apple tree is the same as the cost of two cheeseburgers then it really is criminal not to plant one, at least. Apple trees should be everywhere. We have two in the front garden. One year, when I lived on a smallholding in Devon, my friends Penny Rimbaud and Eve Libertine, both former members of Crass, the anarchist punk band, planted a "Discovery" apple tree in the garden. In year one it produced one apple. In year two we picked five, and in year three there were 13. Now it produces dozens and dozens.

There is very little work involved in tending an apple tree – perhaps a little weeding, mulching and pruning – and there are thousands of varieties out there. John Evelyn mentions some wonderful ones, including the Ladies Longing, the Kirkham apple, the John apple, the Seaming apple, the Cushion apple, Golden Mundi, Leathern Coate and Cat's Head. He also grew over 150 varieties of pear. The point of all these different varieties is that they ripen at different times of the year so, with a selection of apples and



pears, you can guarantee yourself a steady supply from June to November. The Old World thus had its own way of providing food throughout the year, without the need for electrically powered storage devices.

### Onions and garlic

Garlic can be jammed in any odd corner and at any time of the year, and it is said to deter pests, so I plant it near the salads. Soon after the stems topple over, the garlic bulbs can be dug up and dried out in the sun on boards or newspaper, or tied up and hung near the oven or fire. They can be stored in bags or in clumps on hooks. I have to say, however, that when it comes to onions, I have followed the advice of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and no longer bother to grow them: we buy onions because they are cheap, we use a lot of them and it would take up too much space to grow them. Also, it has to be said that you'd be hard put to tell the difference between a home-grown and a shop-bought onion.

### August's husbandry

Palladius sows rape and turnip this month. Seymour also recommends more sowing of radishes and lettuce. And, as far as salads go, try hardy ones such as *pak choi* and Mizuna so you will get salad leaves in the winter. Think ahead, think ahead!

### August's merriment

August is named after Augustus Caesar, the first Roman emperor. The Anglo-Saxons called it *Weodmonath*, meaning "vegetation month". As Thomas Tusser, the Tudor Hugh Fearnley Whittingstall insists in his handbook on husbandry, harvest time is also the time to make merry. There should be much feasting, partying, drinking and dancing. The abundance of the earth has cheered our hearts, and we should give thanks to Ceres, to Mother Earth, to God, and to Nature for her fruitfulness.

In Roman times, the harvest was celebrated with a feast for Ceres, and the custom continued in medieval times under the name Lammass Day. Lammass means "loaf mass" and was all about celebrating the grain harvest by baking fancy loaves with the new wheat. These loaves were blessed in the church. The medieval bakers were highly imaginative, and loaves were baked in the shape of monkeys, elephants and dragons. (Throughout the year, bread baked in the shape of cones, squares, circles, ovals, rectangles and figure eights was used as a teaching aid in geometry lessons.) For the feast, a castle of bread was baked, to be admired during the main courses and eaten at the



end of the feast. (Funnily enough, Victoria and I unwittingly re-created this custom when we held a Simple Living course at our home one July. We held a bread-baking class in the kitchen and, without any prompting, the students baked all sorts of creative loaves: plaited ones, giant loaves, loaves in the shape of a rabbit. One baked the face of Winston Churchill. We carried these impressive loaves in a laundry basket to the village hall, the site of the feast we had planned, and put them in the middle of the table, whereupon the assembled party fell upon them with great relish and satisfaction.)

Other medieval delights were gingerbread, currant buns, short-bread, cucumber bread and plum bread. To drink there was Lamb's Wool, a spiced and warmed cider, with baked apples floating frothily on top.

### August's calendar

- 1 or 2 August Festival of Ceres, or Lammas Day.
- 5 August First day of the oyster season.
- 10 August Feast day of St Lawrence, patron saint of cooks.
- 12 August William Blake died today, 1827.
- 15 August Assumption of the Virgin Mary Day. Today we invoke Mary in her role as the fertile mother, in order to ensure a good grape harvest.
- 24 August First day of Mania, the Roman festival. Also St Bartholomew's Day. He was one of Christ's apostles, supposedly flayed alive and then beheaded. His symbol is a butcher's knife, and he is the patron saint of tanners and leatherworkers. Mania was a Roman festival that celebrated the manes (the spirits of their ancestors). London's rowdy Bartholomew Fair (1133–1855) was a continuation of the festival of Mania.
- 28 August Feast day of St Augustine, author of the Confessions (written AD 397). 🌀





Drift installation



## Art flâneur

# Come on feel the noise

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**Tim Richardson** *shows how you can be up to your ears in art without leaving the home*

So what's an art lover to do during lockdown, with everything closed? I'm not convinced by all these worthy exhortations to "virtually visit" art galleries and museums. It's not the same, is it?

But never fear – there are some kinds of art that you can experience to the full in the comfort of your own home, shed, bed, bath, lavatory or roof. Take sound art. This genre – which operates somewhere between music, poetry and film – became fashionable about a decade ago, when sound artist Susan Philipsz even won the Turner Prize (you can find a video of her affecting piece *Lowlands* on YouTube). Subsequently there were sound art exhibitions at Tate Modern and MOMA (New York) and now no group show of artists is complete without a sound artist or two thrown in. Four British universities offer a postgraduate qualification in the subject or, if

New York takes your fancy, you could always join the Sound Art Program at Columbia (that is, if you have \$69,000 a year for the tuition fees).

Unlike video art, which is still more or less gallery-bound, many pieces of sound art can function perfectly well as pieces of audio that you can listen to, anywhere, on your computer or phone. Nevertheless, I've shied away from writing about sound art in this column up until now, as it's not exactly flâneur-ish (though I suppose you can listen to it while walking along).

Yet the truth is, one of my favourite living artists is categorised as a sound artist, someone whose work seems to affect me more deeply than that of anyone else on the contemporary scene. Caroline Bergvall is a French-Norwegian artist based in London. She did her post-graduate work in England, notably at Dartington College in



Devon, that great avant-garde educational institution which is sadly no longer what it once was. Bergvall has turned to her artistic advantage the fact that she finds herself caught between cultures, between languages and even between accents, for she sounds kind of Norwegian as well as French, with elements of London thrown in when she speaks in English.

Or rather intones. Her sound pieces are essentially text-based, and play with elements of slang, lost languages (Anglo-Saxon features strongly) and what are called minoritarian languages, like Romansh. Her work exists on the page as experimental poetry of the highest order, but I suspect it's her performance style above all that has cemented her reputation and gained her a dedicated following. For Bergvall's sound works have a quality of drama and ritual and barely constrained emotion about them. I don't know what it is about her work, but I frequently end up in tears when I'm either listening to it, or reading it on the page. I suppose I am a "words person" and perhaps that's why I'm so drawn to her word revelries, her reverences, her reveries.

You can make up your own mind, perhaps, by listening to one (or more) of the generous excerpts from her work at [carolinebergvall.com](http://carolinebergvall.com).

Some of these function as performance pieces, and several of them are embedded as five-minute video clips in the site's Performances section (click on Work, top right).

*Drift* (2012) exists both in illustrated book form and as a 75-minute performance piece with electronic text projection and live percussion. Nautical themes pervade Bergvall's work, and this piece was inspired by the mysterious Anglo-Saxon poem *The Seafarer*, which Ezra Pound (something of a sound-artist himself) translated back in 1911. The performance, and this video excerpt, features a central section of the piece/poem entitled *Shake*, with stanzas such as:

I started to shake  
ok ok when I started to  
scook push sharken churn  
ok wander ok scacan  
thats when I started to shake

This gives you a sense of the overall timbre of the piece, which mixes in slang and invented words in an essentially musical manner. Bergvall's chanting, lyrical voice is extraordinary, like something from a different time and place, bringing to mind the calls of ancient mariners, 18th-century street-sellers or African tribal music. Now that I'm writing about it, a comparison

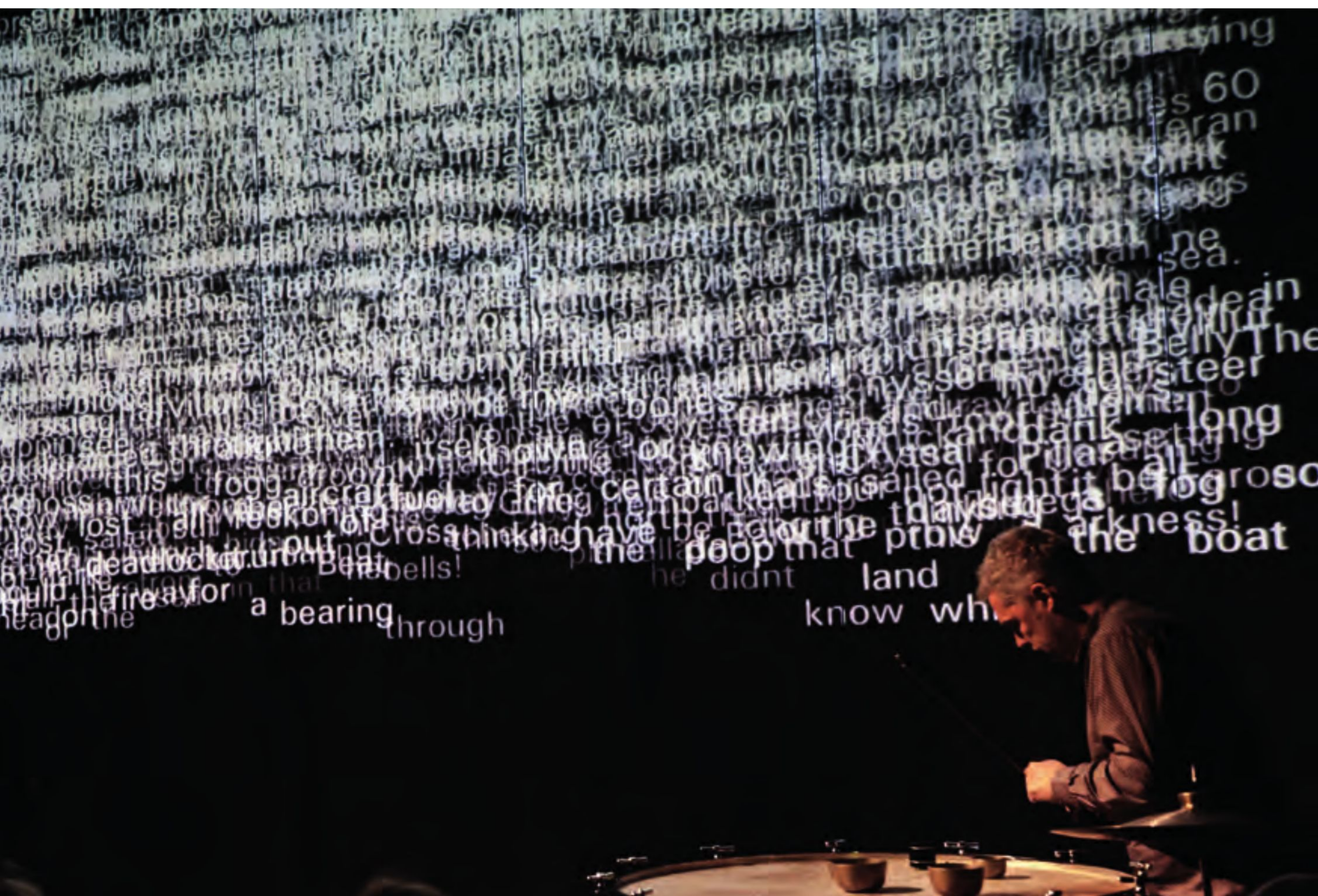
[photo: Josh Redman]

[photo: EKH, Logan Centre for the Arts, Chicago]





Caroline Bergvall performs *Drift*, inspired by the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Seafarer*  
 Caroline Bergvall Zodiac mural, Chicago







[photo: Sophie Gerrard]

Bergvall's *Ragadawn* sunrise performance, 5.30am Isle of Skye, August 2018

with 1980s cult band the Cocteau Twins pops up, since they also used an invented vocabulary, though that has never occurred to me while actually listening to the piece. Oblique references to the plight of migrants trying to gain entry to Europe by sea make it still more piercing and affecting.

Another video excerpt in this section is more staccato in style, as it jumps around a performance of the piece *Ragadawn*, filmed in 2016 on the quayside at Tilbury Docks in front of a hardy audience at six o'clock in the morning. Here one can understand the importance of site-specificity for certain of Bergvall's works.

Then, under Installations, you

can find a five-minute segment of *Noping* (2012), which takes as its jumping-off point the lost Old English letter Þ, or "thorn", which relates to the "th" sound in English today (so "noping" = "nothing"). This piece is initially much more conversational in style, though it eventually becomes staccato and incantatory, taking on the urgently mesmeric quality of so much of Bergvall's output.

This section of the site also includes several iterations of a piece entitled *Say "Parsley": How You Speak Will Be Used Against You*. The first version, made in Exeter in 2001, is superficially quite comic, since it consists of a recording of scores of people stopped in the



streets and asked to say the words “rolling hills”. It is salutary to hear just how different this little phrase sounds when spoken by different people, once you are paying attention. It becomes clear that in reality we are all speaking our own version of our common language. The trigger for the piece was far grimmer than this, though, as the artist explains: “The background to *Say ‘Parsley’* is the biblical ‘shibboleth’, a violent event where language itself is gatekeeper, and a pretext to massacre. The pronunciation of a given word exposes the identity of the speaker. To speak becomes a give-away. ‘Are you one of us, not one of us? How you speak will be used against you.’ The most recent example of a large-scale shibboleth was the massacre of tens of thousands of Creole Haitians on the border of the Dominican Republic in 1937, when the criteria for execution was the failure to pronounce *perejil* (parsley) in the accepted Spanish manner, with a rolling ‘r’. Dominican Army troops carried out the massacre on the orders of Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo.”

I suspect the good people of Exeter had no idea that this was the artist’s hidden agenda. (Perhaps Bergvall should have got them to say “pasty” instead? Sorry, bad joke on several levels.)

The richest pickings of all can be found in the Soundworks section – probably my favourite here is another passage from *Drift*, entitled *Hafville (Submerged Voice)* (2015), which has the constant refrain: “to go off course/to be lost”. This vision of being lost, or of being nowhere, recurs in Bergvall’s work. *VIA* comprises Bergvall reading 47 English translations of the opening lines of Dante’s *Inferno*, which starts: “Midway along the journey of life, I found myself in a dark wood, where the right way was hidden, for from the straight path I had gone astray.” Or words to that effect, since poets including Longfellow, Heaney and Rossetti all came up with their own version. So while ostensibly these lines from Dante are “repeated” 47 times, on listening you understand that essentially they are not, in that each translator is lost in their own private way.

*The Host Tale* (2010) is a different kind of literary exploration: an exuberant mash-up of Middle English, contemporary slang and other lingos, it stands as an example of Bergvall’s “transhistoric poetic experiment” based around Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, later expanded and published in the volume *Meddle English* (2011).

Bergvall’s work sits in the most poetic corner of the sound art universe. Most practitioners make



field recordings or deal in found sounds, which they then mould into atmospheric soundscapes. I must confess that ultimately I find most of this work quite dull. Then there are the sound artists who are essentially musicians, whether using their own customised or invented instruments (in the tradition of Harry Partch – Tarek Atoui and Thessia Machado produce good work in this vein); computer-driven electronica; or simply noise. London-based Haroon Mirza falls into this category, but my recommendation for online browsing is Tristan Perich ([tristanperich.com](http://tristanperich.com)). You can find a hoard of excerpts from this New York sound artist's back catalogue here. He mixes traditional instruments – such as harpsichords, cellos and string quartets – with something called 1-bit electronics, creating pieces that sound a little like programmatic music in the manner of Steve Reich, though even more austere.

Other sound artists create immersive sound installations for gallery and other spaces (Florian Hecker, Luke Fowler), and then there are the more abstract practitioners, producing work that can often be interminable and irritating, though there are also rewarding examples by the likes of Toshiya Tsunoda from Osaka.

Political sound art is popular at the moment, though it generally manages to be equal parts opportunistic, shallow and pompous, like nearly all work produced in this vein. (It might be argued that good political artists, like Ai Weiwei, can generally also be described as full-time political activists.)

Earlier I was decrying the concept of online-visiting of galleries and museums. While I stick by that basic point, I'm now going to go back on it – because in newsworthy spirit, there are a couple of globally important masterpieces of world art that have been restored recently, which no one can now go and see. Which means that the only way to judge how well they've cleaned up is: online. The first is Jan and Hubert Van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece*, which you can enjoy in extreme hi-res close-up at [closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be/ghentaltarpiece/](http://closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be/ghentaltarpiece/). Warning: the website is as annoying as it is technologically advanced, and laden with traps, the first of which is that you have to press a mysterious "Open" button in the top-left corner, since the site begins in "Closed" mode. ("Closed" here means that the altarpiece itself is shown closed up in default mode, with the panels folded in, so that if you are not careful, all you will get to see are the less interesting panels



on the outside of the package.) But once you do get inside, and if your internet connection can handle it, you can just about navigate around various panels and details, homing in to an astonishing, rewarding level of detail on the faces of the figures, for example. The Lamb of God at the centre of the scene has been restored so that its remarkable gaze can be newly appreciated. Is it really “humanoid”, as others have judged? Is that Jesus in there? You can decide for yourself.

The other recently restored masterpiece is the series of frescoed rooms in the Vatican known as the *Stanze* or Raphael Rooms (1508–24), which are routinely upstaged by the Sistine Chapel on tourist visits. But these rooms represent a comparable masterpiece, and have been undergoing gradual restoration since the 1980s. This spring the restorers finally finished the job and you can now take a virtual tour of them (and the chapel) at [museivaticani.va](http://museivaticani.va). Click on Explore (top left), then, under Collections, click Museums. From there, select Raphael’s Rooms and then Virtual Tour, which lets you navigate round the *Stanze* room by room. It’s much better in full-screen mode (click the four-arrow symbol, lower right). To move to the next room you click on the double arrow, lower right; there are four in total. The most celebrated scenes

are the *Liberation of St Peter* in the Room of Heliodorus (an extraordinary night scene) and the group portrait that is *The School of Athens* in the Room Of The Segnatura. I hate to make it all more complicated, but if you want to better understand what you’re seeing, it may be a good idea to have two separate windows open at the same time: the Virtual Tour window, and the Raphael’s Rooms page, where there are links to each room with captions relating to the various fresco scenes. Then you can switch from one to the other.

Phew! Is it all worth it? I don’t know. It’s just quite rare to find Renaissance masterpieces given this level of hi-res attention for free online.

If it’s all been a bit much, why not go off on and make the perfect dry martini? Here is my recipe:

1. Pour Beefeater gin over smoking-cold ice in large glass or metal shaker.
2. Bless with tiny splash of Noilly Prat vermouth.
3. Stir/mix vigorously with metal spoon for 30 seconds.
4. Strain into a pre-chilled martini glass.
5. Anoint limpid surface with moisture from chunk of squeezed lemon skin.
6. Garnish with thin lemon twist.
7. Sling computer out of window. 🖱️



## Idler classics

# Keeping it surreal

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Henry Eliot on the dark origins of Leonora Carrington's bizarre and uplifting novel *The Hearing Trumpet*

IN the summer of 1939 the artist Leonora Carrington was living with Max Ernst in the village of St Martin d'Ardèche in the south of France. She was 22, he was 48, and together they were creating a surrealist idyll, painting dancing horses on the walls of their dilapidated farmhouse, sculpting cement figures in the garden, tending vines and feeding their peacocks. When friends came to stay Leonora played pranks, serving cold squid-ink tapioca instead of caviar, or omelettes seasoned with her guests' own hair. There was a scarlet unicorn inside the kitchen cupboard and a brown bat in the basement.

Carrington had grown up in Crookhey Hall, a gothic mansion in Lancashire where she imbibed strange folk tales from her Irish nanny. After being expelled from two convent schools (for her uncanny ability to write backwards with both hands) she attended

finishing school in Florence, "came out" as a debutante at the Ritz and scandalised the Ascot royal enclosure by reading Aldous Huxley in public.

She then decided to become an artist, enrolling at the Ozenfant Academy of Fine Arts in 1936, the same year that the first surrealist exhibition was staged in London. In 1937 she met Max Ernst, with his shock of white hair. They fell in love and Carrington ran away to join him in Paris, where she painted her feet with mustard and turned up naked to parties. Then in 1938 they moved to their otherworldly home in the Ardèche.

Though Carrington was an artist all her life, she was also a brilliant writer and it was while living with Ernst that she began to write stories about dreams, leprosy, wild horses and female sexuality. She later described this time as "an era of paradise". But this golden period was soon to be shattered.



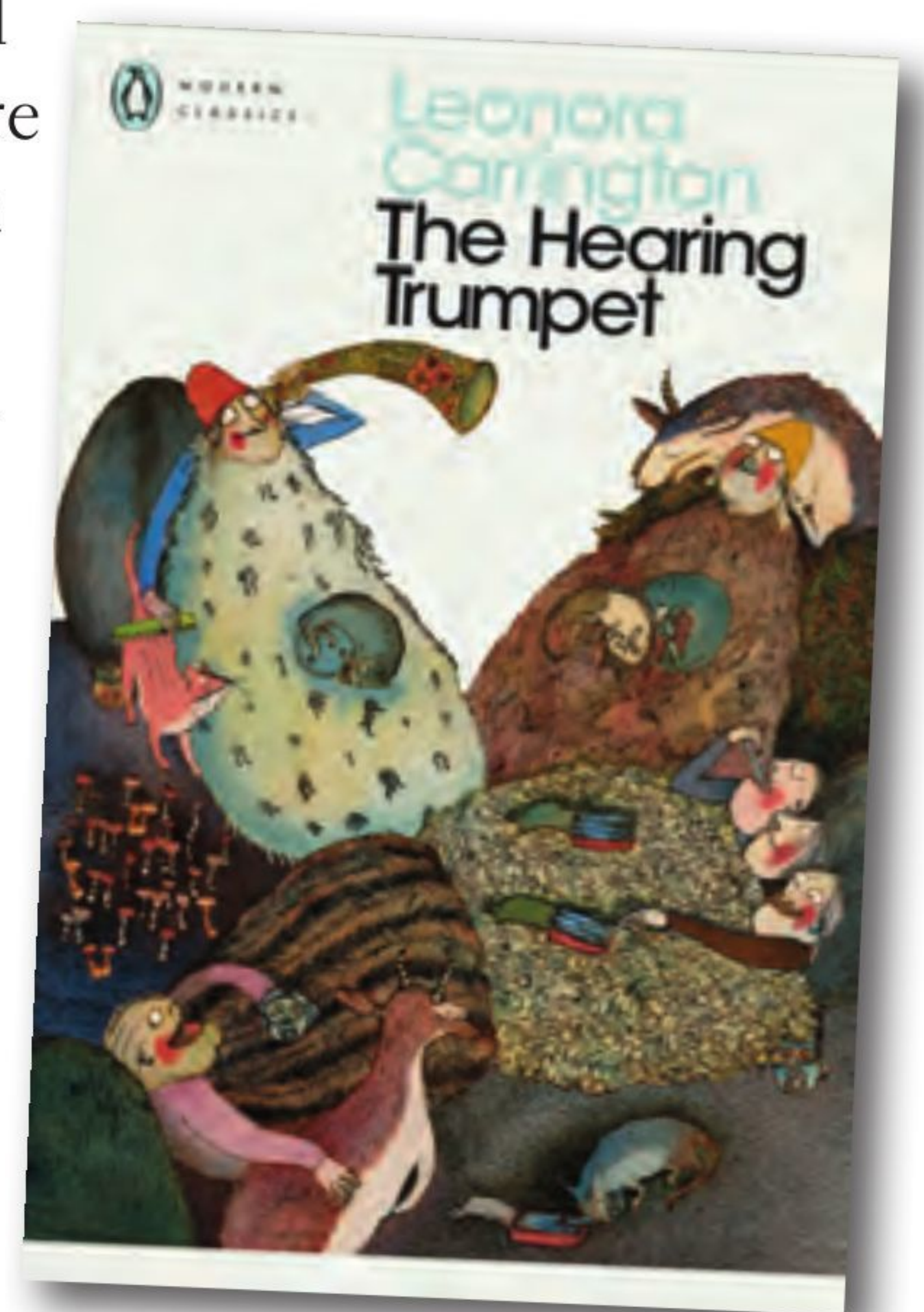
When war broke out, Ernst was arrested as a German “enemy alien”. Carrington managed to secure his release, but when Germany invaded he was re-arrested by the Nazis, as a peddler of “degenerate art”. He eventually escaped to the USA, with the help of Peggy Guggenheim, but his relationship with Carrington was broken irrevocably. She was abandoned in St Martin, where she became increasingly mentally unstable.

In 1940 she managed to reach Spain with the help of friends, but she had a breakdown at the British Embassy and found herself committed to a mental asylum in Santander. There she was made to take powerful drugs like the barbiturate Luminal as part of a brutal regime. “It was very much like having been dead,” she wrote afterwards. She finally escaped Europe by marrying her friend, the Mexican Ambassador to Portugal, and sailing to New York under diplomatic immunity. The couple travelled on to Mexico, where they divorced amicably.

Carrington’s literary masterpiece is her novel *The Hearing Trumpet*, the seeds of which were planted in the asylum. Three years after her release, André Breton persuaded her to write about her experience of “madness” and in 1944 she published a haunting account

called *Down Below*, in which she describes the ruthless therapies, the sexual assault and the unsanitary conditions she endured. She accompanied the text with a chilling sketch of her doctor, Morales, whose dead eyes stare out of a swirling pencil-drawn cloud. A few years later she began writing *The Hearing Trumpet* while sitting in the Plaza de los Mariachis in Mexico City “in the midst of cacophonous noise”.

*The Hearing Trumpet* is the story of a deaf 92-year-old Englishwoman, Marian Leatherby, who is rather proud of her “short grey beard”. It opens with Marian receiving a hearing trumpet, with which she overhears her family plotting to incarcerate her in a sinister retirement home. Lightsome Hall turns out to be a converted medieval Spanish castle “financed by a prominent American cereal company”, where old ladies live in nursery-rhyme-inspired chalets. In the dismal canteen there is a mysterious portrait of a leering Abbess, winking with “a most disconcerting mixture of





mockery and malevolence” and when Marian is handed a book about the Abbess’s life, she unwittingly turns into a feminist anarchist, staging a revolution and overrunning Lightsome Hall with the aid of her best friend Carmella and her fellow inmates. Author Ali Smith describes it as “one of the most original, joyful, satisfying and quietly visionary novels of the 20th century”. As Luis Buñuel commented, “Reading *The Hearing Trumpet* liberates us from the miserable reality of our days.”

Carrington spent most of the rest of her life in Mexico. She married the Hungarian photographer Imre Weisz, with whom she had two sons, and continued to paint and write, as well as designing costumes and sets for the theatre. Although

*The Hearing Trumpet* was completed in the early 1960s, it wasn’t published until 1974, when it came out in France in translation. Two years later it was published in its original English form.

In 2009 Carrington reached the same age as Marian Leatherby. She was the last surviving member of the Surrealist movement, as well as a staunch campaigner for women’s rights, a disciple of Tibetan lamas and an independent-spirited anarchist. She died in May 2011 at the age of 94. 🎧

*Henry Eliot is the author of The Penguin Classics Book, Follow This Thread and, with Matt Lloyd-Rose, Curiosity: An Alternative A–Z of London*

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## Books

# Bound to please

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Cathleen Mair rounds up some of the best of the current non-fiction titles

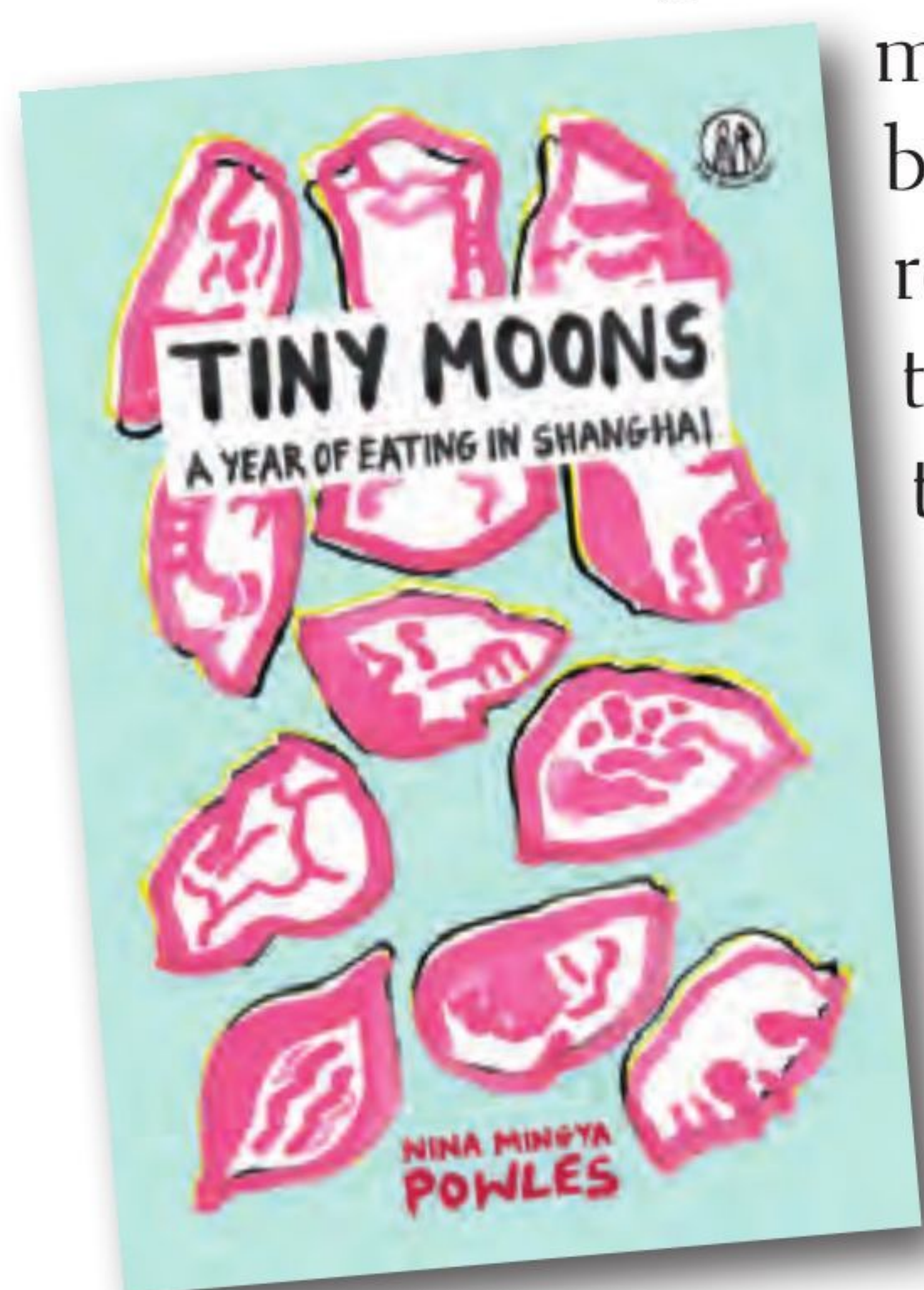
*Tiny Moons: A Year Of Eating In Shanghai* **Nina Mingya Powles**

(The Emma Press, £8.99)

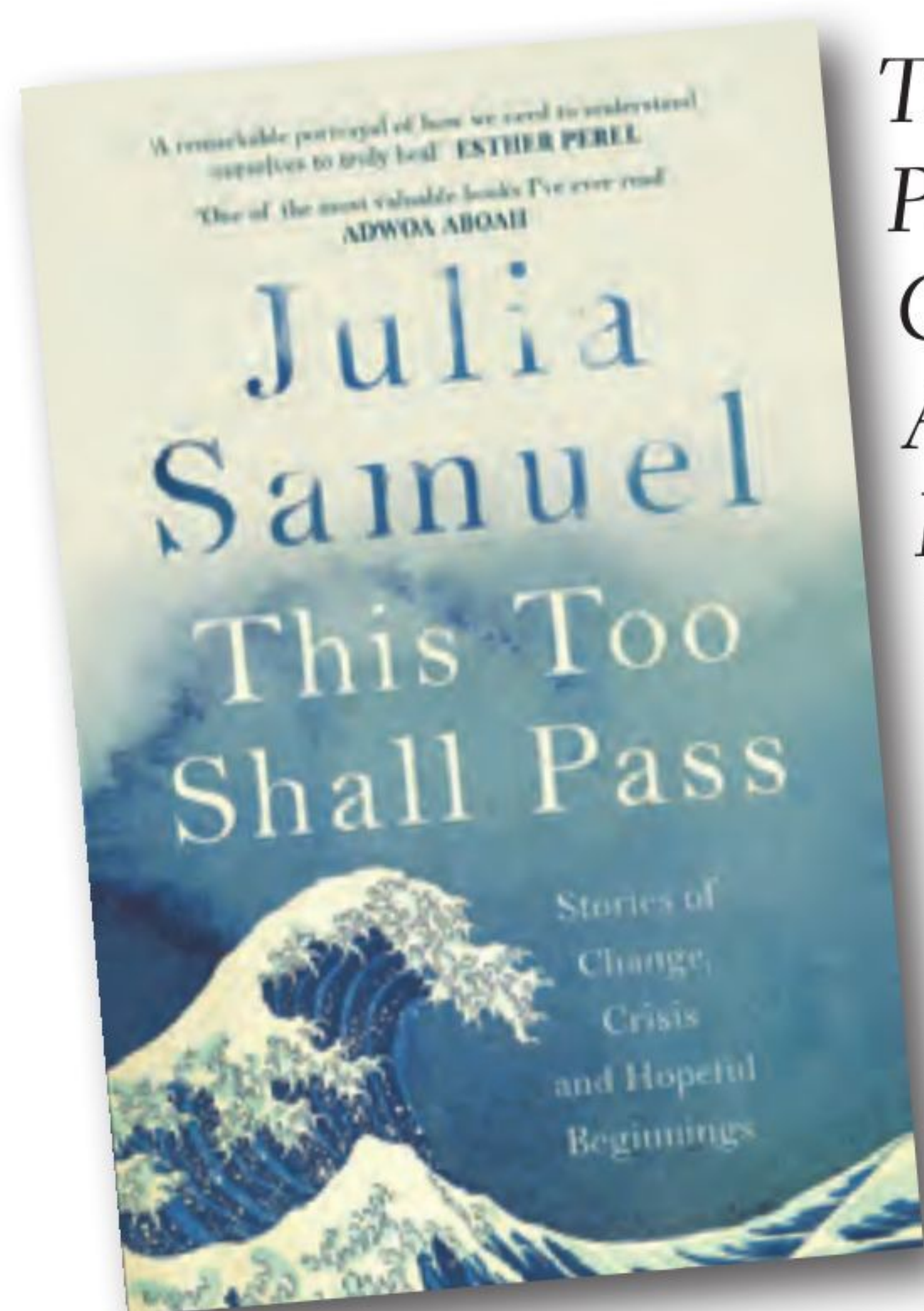
The essay collection *Tiny Moons* opens with a childhood memory – “A pair of pink plastic chopsticks. A bowl full of instant noodles. The smell of chicken stock and jasmine tea” – that quickly turns into an act of rebellion. Writer Nina Mingya Powles describes flipping her bowl, sending the noodles and chopsticks flying. It’s a small defiant act that highlights some of the issues Powles grappled with as a writer of Chinese-Malaysian heritage growing up in New Zealand. An account of a university year abroad in Shanghai, *Tiny Moons* is as

much a chance to go back to her roots and resolve such tensions. In a way that will feel familiar to many, Powles’ strongest memories are closely tied to food.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the dishes described in *Tiny Moons* invite reflection on family, loneliness, travel, language and the idea of home. Throughout, she captures the depth of meaning we attach to the rituals of eating, cooking, tasting and smelling, whether it’s folding *jiaozi* on a dinner table with friends, or the elderly couple eating cup noodles with boiled eggs on a long-distance train – “the woman takes out two jars, adding a spoonful each of homemade pickled veggies and chilli oil into the soup”. Powles also writes about Shanghai street food – think wonton noodle soup, pan-fried dumplings, sesame pancakes, spring onion noodles, pineapple buns and banana fritters – in a way that will make you drool. This is a delicious little book, complete with lovely drawings of dumplings by Emma Dai’An Wright, which beautifully examines identity, memory and belonging. Mostly, though, it will leave you very, very hungry.







*This Too Shall Pass: Stories Of Change, Crisis And Hopeful Beginnings*

**Julia Samuel**  
(Penguin Life, £14.99)

*This Too Shall Pass* is a book about transitions. In

it, psychotherapist Julia Samuel draws on extensive clinical experience, as well as some ancient philosophy, to explore how we might support ourselves physically, mentally and emotionally through change. Samuel, who also presents the *Idler* online course on coping with grief, is a compassionate and wise guide. Among the diverse cast of clients in the book, we meet a new father adjusting to life with a young baby, a 20-something struggling with the transition from university to employment, and a recent divorcée finding love at the age of 43. Elsewhere Samuel discusses redundancy, menopause, marriage, sexuality and gender identity. The situations are recognisable, even ordinary, which makes the book especially helpful. Admittedly, it doesn't touch on the experience of lockdown, but the lessons are useful nonetheless: look after your body, set up boundaries, structure

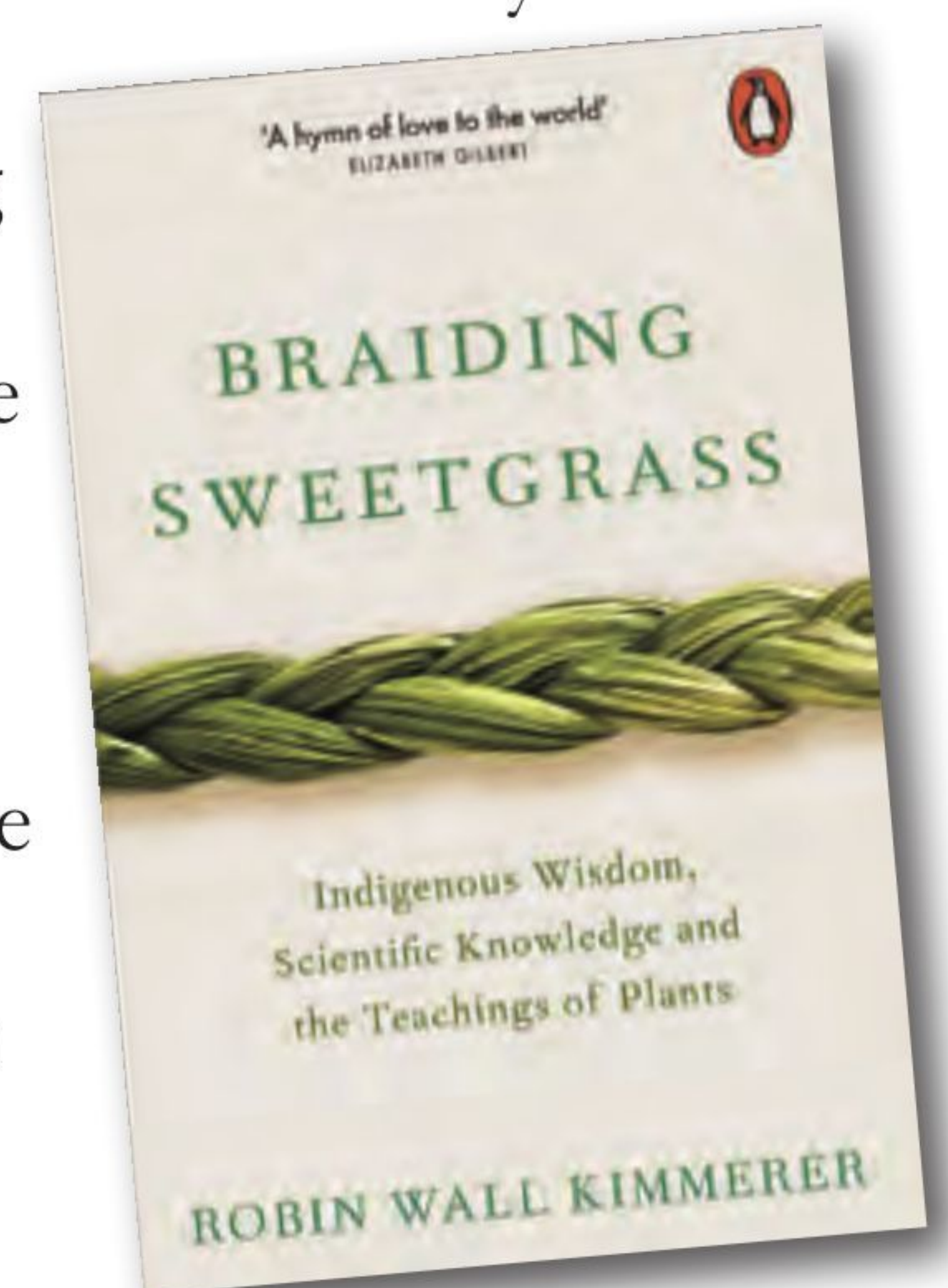
your time, be kind to yourself. These might seem obvious conclusions, but Samuel is right to remind us of their importance. I cannot think of a more useful book to be reading in the current circumstances.

*Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge And The Teachings Of Plants*  
**Robin Wall Kimmerer**

(Milkweed Editions, £9.99)

When reading *Braiding Sweetgrass*, especially the essays about wild strawberries and pecans, I was reminded of Seamus Heaney's poem *Blackberry-Picking*.

Robin Wall Kimmerer's prose is not only poetic, she also captures something of the curious, childlike love of nature we find in Heaney's poem. A professor of environmental and forest biology at the State University of New York and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Kimmerer is a masterful storyteller who blends science and ecology with folklore and family history. Indeed, it's worth reading *Braiding Sweetgrass* for the descriptions of tapping maple trees in upstate New York and the retelling of the Native American





legend of the Skywoman. But there's so much more at stake here. The story of the Potawatomi, and Kimmerer's family in particular, offers a glimpse into a much larger and devastating history of loss suffered by indigenous peoples in America – loss of life, land, language and customs. From an ecological perspective this loss, argues Kimmerer, has left everyone worse off. By erasing indigenous culture we have lost the ability to engage respectfully with the land around us. *Braiding Sweetgrass*, then, is an attempt to bridge indigenous and Western traditions, and return to a more reciprocal, celebratory and grateful relationship with nature.

*OK, Let's Do Your Stupid Idea*

**Patrick Freyne** (Penguin, out 17 September, £8.99)

It's become far too much of a cliché to say that Irish writers are having a moment but, while Patrick Freyne doesn't quite fit in the same category as Sally Rooney, Anna

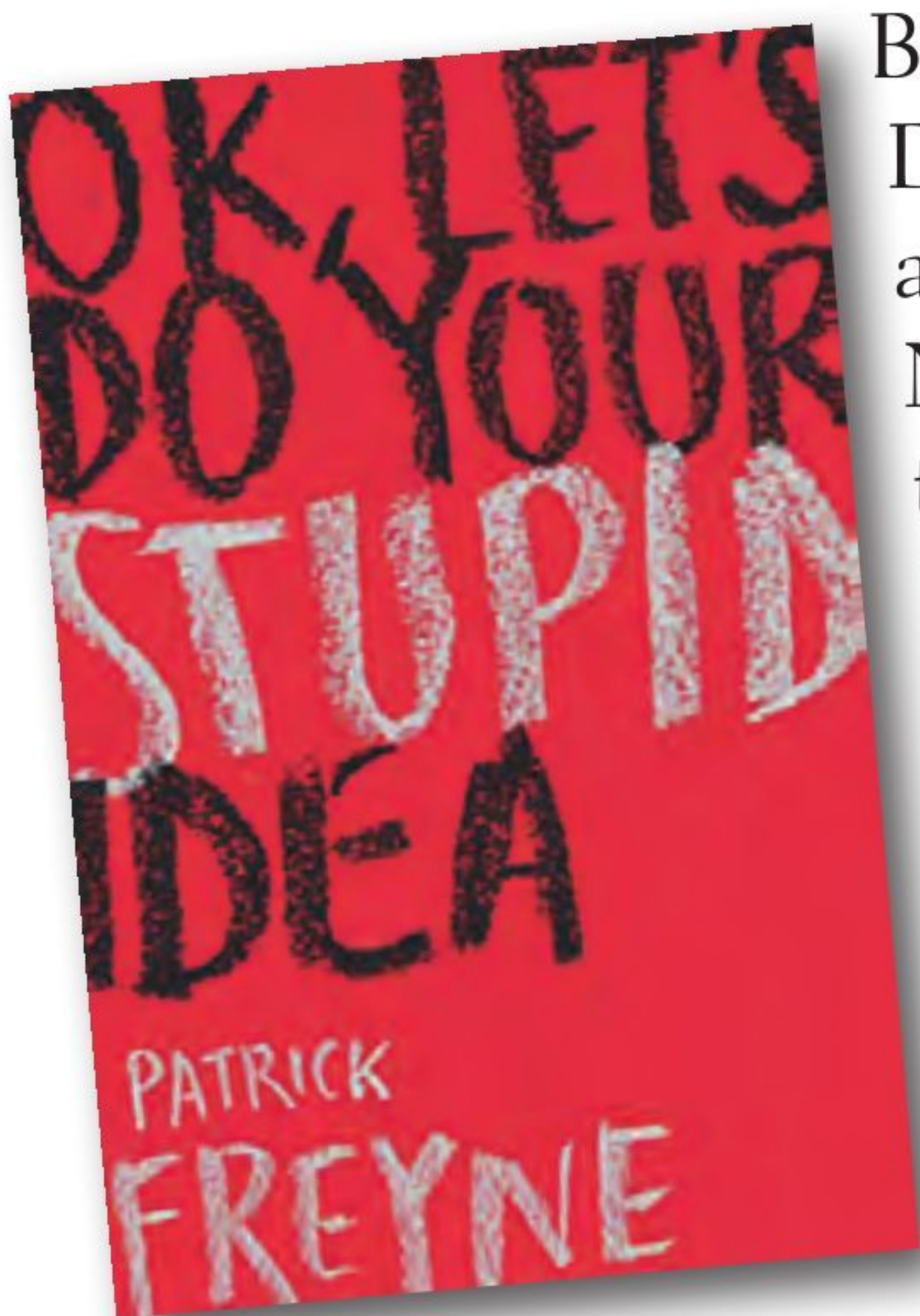
Burns and Naoise Dolan, this really is an excellent debut. Now a journalist at the *Irish Times*, Freyne spent his twenties trying, and failing, to make it with his band National

Prayer Breakfast. *OK, Let's Do Your Stupid Idea* draws from this messier, less successful period of his life. In many ways, reading the book feels like spending an evening at the pub with a friend. Freyne is chatty, funny and honest, and immediately makes you feel at home. The personal essays, which also touch on Freyne's childhood on the Curragh Camp army base and a summer spent in Bremen as a penniless student, are equal parts self-deprecating, relatable, sad and amusing. He weaves together the silly and serious, from touring with his band in the UK where they played for five people in Cardiff, three in Manchester and “ marvelled at Britain's many motorway service stations”, to the sudden death of a friend – “at 21, I realised you could die in a stupid, meaningless way. This knowledge was absolutely useless to me the next time I lost someone I loved.”

*Double Lives: A History Of Working Motherhood* **Helen McCarthy**

(Bloomsbury, £30.00)

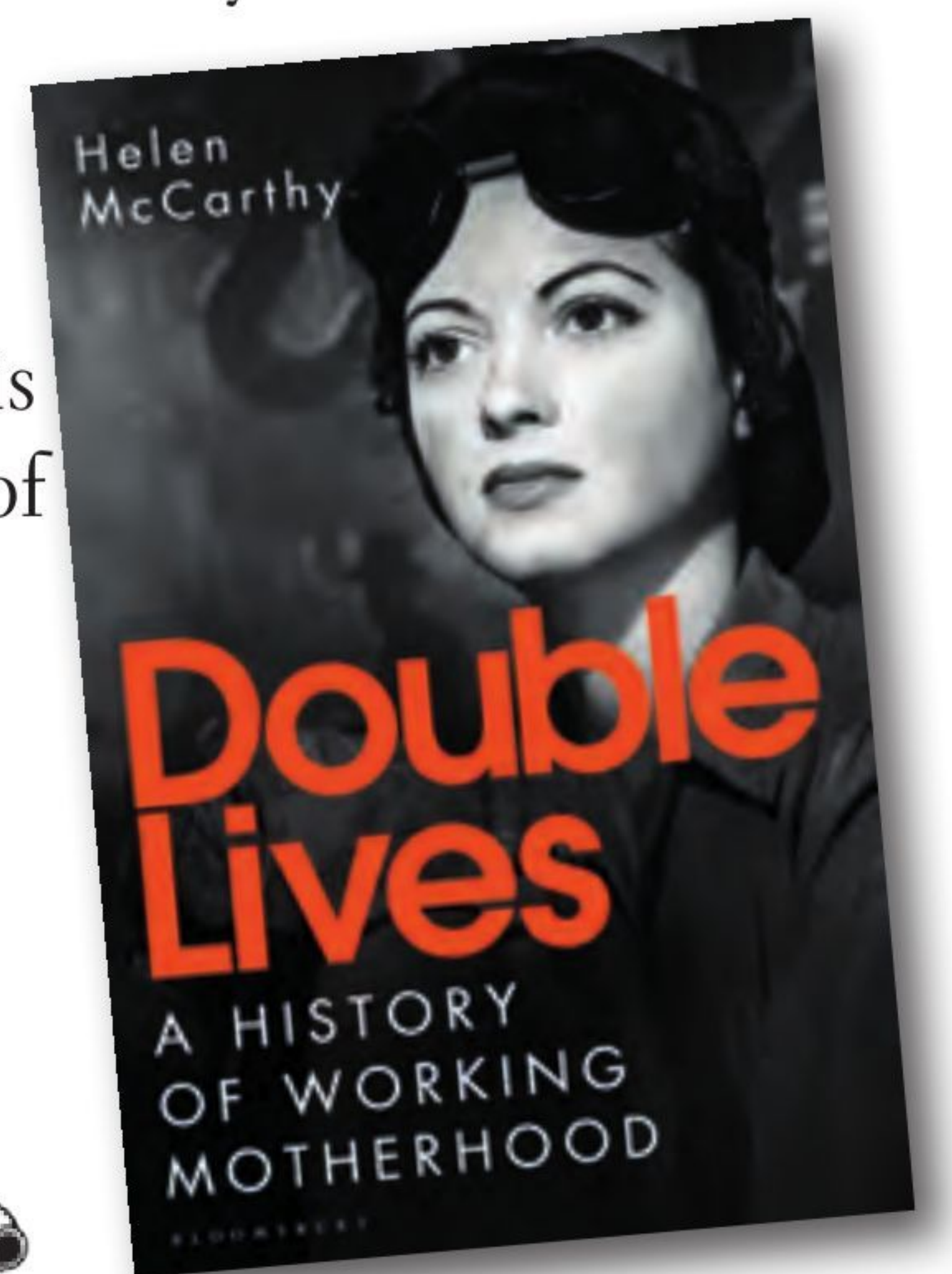
In 2018, nearly three-quarters of mothers in Britain participated in the workforce. In Victorian Britain by contrast, working motherhood was perceived as a social evil – “blamed for idleness amongst men” – even though nearly four million women worked for wages. According to Cambridge historian





Helen McCarthy, a huge shift has taken place in the public and political perception of working mothers since the mid-19th century, from social evil to social norm, “unnatural urge or anti-social act” to “legitimate aspiration”. *Double Lives* traces the history of this shift over the past 200 years. It covers working conditions in Victorian cotton mills, the wartime employment of women in munitions, Shirley Conran’s bestselling *Superwoman*, the myth of “having it all” and the experience of migrant mothers in Britain. Drawing on surveys, economic and social reports, Mass Observation archives, census data as well as novels and films, McCarthy deftly brings out the forgotten voices,

thoughts and feelings of working mothers. She features married mothers, unmarried mothers, divorced and separated mothers across social classes, regions and ethnicities, and explores the ways in which they pursued meaning and independence through paid work from the 19th century to the present day. In this sense, concludes McCarthy, workplace equality is not just an interest of the modern high-achieving feminist elite, it has been a right historically denied to women across social and economic divides. 🎧




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Fashion

# Best face forward

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*Now there's one accessory that everybody should own.  
But can face masks be turned into fashion items?  
With the emphasis on ethical, it seems so . . .*



Ballet Slipper by Florence Bridge  
Some profits from each sale goes  
to the Fuel Our Frontline charity.  
100% cotton lining, duchess satin front covering.  
Adult size. £12  
[florencebridge.com](http://florencebridge.com)



## FASHION



Bold designs by Just Hype

Bold designs by Just Hype, with earloop design, these masks are comfortable and easy to wear.

Front material: 95% polyester and 5% elastane. Inside material: 100% cotton.

£24.99

[justhype.com](http://justhype.com)





Zesty and Shima designs by Newt

Reusable face mask with two layers of fabric made from recycled waste plastic bottles.  
It is also reversible with another Newt print inside, so you get two prints in one mask.

Non-medical, one-size adult face mask with adjustable ear straps.

Adult size. £15  
[newtlondon.com](http://newtlondon.com)



## FASHION



3-ply facemasks with filter pocket by The Dangerfields  
100% cotton with elastic strap  
Children and adult sizes. £15  
[the-dangerfields.myshopify.com](https://the-dangerfields.myshopify.com)



## Music

# Shaken all over

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**Sandy Burnett** *rattles off some reasons why he's obsessed with the humble tambourine*

**B**ACK in the dim and distant past when we weren't all in corona lockdown and international travel was still a thing, work used to take me quite regularly to New Orleans, Louisiana. It's one of the most interesting cities I've had the pleasure of visiting, because it's somewhere that exists for music. Not just formal gigs – some of the best playing and singing takes place *al fresco*; in bustling Jackson Square and in the historic setting of Louis Armstrong Park; or as a central part of the Crescent City's street parades, a tradition that goes back over a century. As those parade bands stride past, the bass drum and cymbals are what power the rhythm along, but it's the tambourine is played that really stands out. The sound is deeply rhythmical and funky, and musically way more than the sum of its parts. It was in NOLA that my unlikely obsession with the tambourine began.

On one level, playing it is easy

– bash it or shake it and you've already made a start. Just think of Sarah Brown, the Mission Doll from *Guys and Dolls* and one of music theatre's most famous practitioners of the instrument. The stage directions indicate that she should make her entrance holding a tambourine as she and her fellow Save-A-Soul Missionaries exhort Broadway's low-down gamblers to "Follow the Fold". Another technique involves delicately drumming it with the fingertips – that's the way it's played in symphony orchestras, in shimmering spectacles such as the ballet score *Petrushka*. Igor Stravinsky's depiction of a snowy Shrovetide fair in St Petersburg calls on the tambourine to add an extra frosty sparkle to the scene. In the warmer climes of Brazil you'll hear a tambourine-like instrument known as a *pandeiro*. In the delicate hands of master players such as Airtó Moreira or



multi-instrumentalist Hermeto Pascoal, it's a wonderful thing: they essentially play it by rocking the hand back and forth, using the side of the thumb and the fingers.

What I heard in Louisiana though was something different again – a much more physical sound. The way they play it there is much more like the act of clapping your hands, one of which happens to have a tambourine in it. The palm slaps dead against the drum part of the tambourine, skin on skin, deadening the sound, rather like a mini bass drum. And out of that, deep funkiness arises.

“Hey! Mr Tambourine Man,” goes the Bob Dylan song, but in Louisiana, and the Southern States in general, the instrument is traditionally played by women during church worship. That said, these days tambourine playing is becoming more of an equal opportunities occupation. Take Herlin Riley for example, whom the trumpeter and bandleader Wynton Marsalis chose as long-term collaborator both in his own septet and in the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. Riley is probably the pre-eminent New Orleans jazz drummer, and Wynton encouraged him to bring all the music that really inspired him to their gigs. So he found a way of working the tambourine into his playing, integrating it into the

lilting swing and backbeat funk that's central to the New Orleans sound.

Which brings me back to my own interest in the tambourine. I'm essentially a string player, using my fingers to tune and shape notes just like the human voice does. If, as is often said, all musical instruments either imitate the singing voice or the beating heart, then the tambourine fits firmly into the latter category, with no scales or chords to worry about. But then again, as with any type of music making, especially the super-simple kind, it's a lot harder than it looks – something I'm beginning to find out. Yes, I hope my tambourine playing can pass muster on Bourbon Street one day – but that may take a while. 🥁





Lee's Ear

# All the right noises

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Idler content provider **Stewart Lee** recommends some recent releases



COMPRISING two roughly 25-minute solos, *Just Another Day At Home*... has leaked on to the altruistic bandcamp platform from John Edwards' self-isolation, the unstoppable sap of spring. The 56-year-old improvised music scene face is a tenacious sprig of jazz mistletoe, tangled eternally in the sacred oak of his battered acoustic bass. Clusters of notes clatter, and strings stretch to their elastic limits, then tinkle like *kalimbas*, defining the dimensions of Edwards' instrument. Grappling with the

cultural record of our species' demise, alien academics will carve Edwards' name upon the eternal tablet.



On *Ad Hoc And Words* the table-top English surrealist Adam Bohman is the latest beneficiary of the experimentalist-about-town Douglas Benford. Toe-bells twinkle in a scraped-metal abyss on the 17-minute "The Everyday Basis", and something monstrous grunts at a tranquilised accordion. Dog biscuits are shaken, but no dog arrives. Bohman speaks at last on

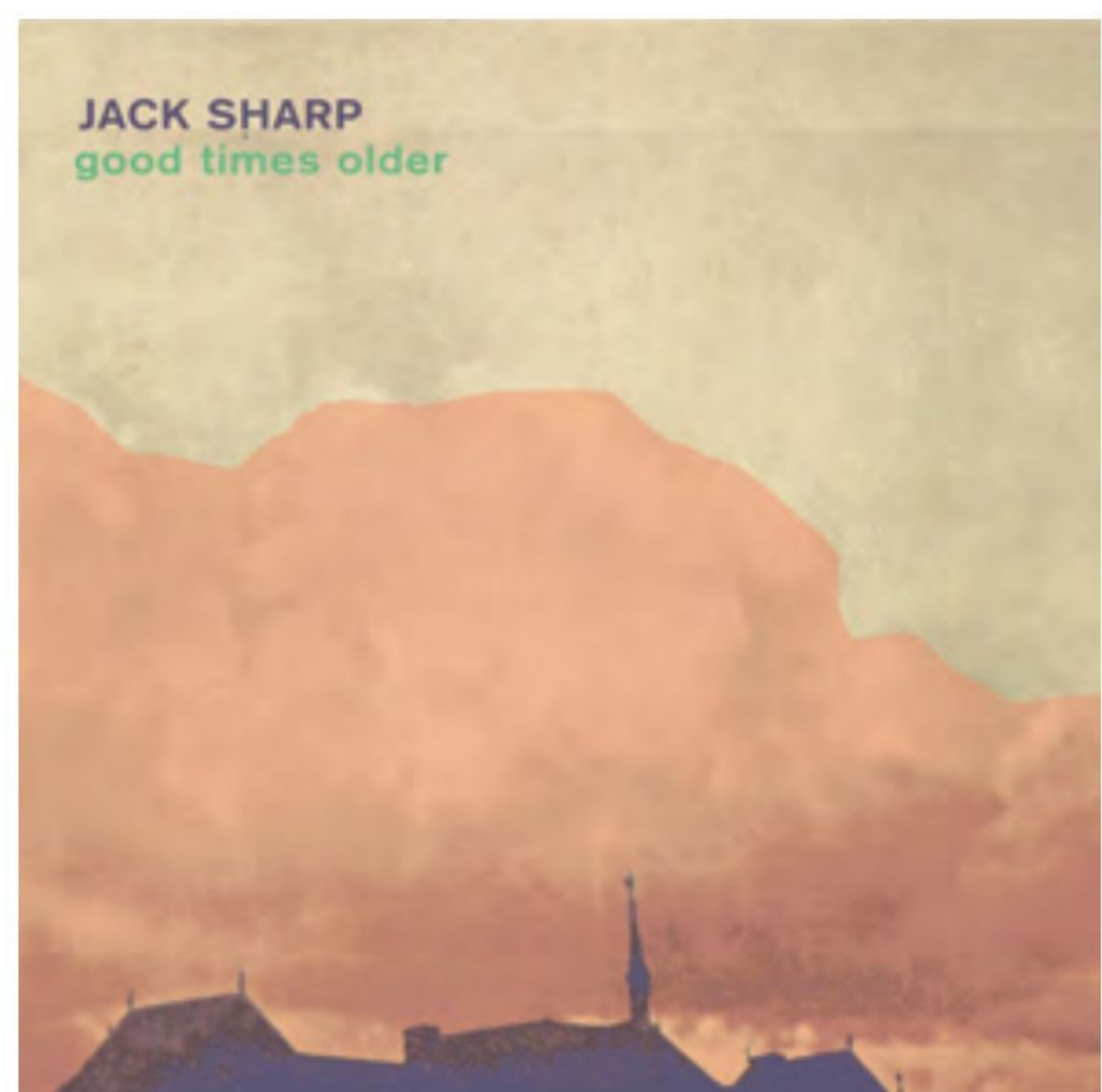


“Bandstand Recital”, listing unrelated ingredients and convenience store visits with conversational casualness, banalities now exotic, as Benford mumbles and drones. Because virus-free soap operas now seem like science fiction, Bohman’s response to the world appears rational, but no less compelling than when I first saw him, upstairs in a squatted Hackney pub, where he enchanted a room of fewer than ten, from his trash-strewn table, 30 years ago, in simpler times.



Casual consumers irked by the above releases need not fear Laura Cannell, whose work conforms to a more consensual ideal of beauty. From within her Norfolk fastness she applies improvisational procedures to an ingrained medievalism using polyphonic violins and recorders, and her human lungs, to posit an avant-garde but ancient music that gives

tympanic membranes a hornet-sized buzz. *The Earth With Her Crowns* documents two spring days last year Cannell spent inside Wapping Hydraulic Power Station, responding in real time to the resonance of the building, a woman of mysterious gifts instigating a cautious gavotte with a capricious echo. Now we are cabined, cribbed and confined, but once air was moving somewhere in a vast empty space, pushed by string and breath from source to surface, and out at last into our sensation-starved ears.



Like Cannell, Jack Sharp once played a kind of music that never quite existed, a fusion of English folk and 1970s Vertigo swirl which, while intermittently achieved by Led Zeppelin or Fairport Convention via sheer penicillin petri-dish chance, was most fully realised by Sharp’s band Wolf People 15 years ago. *Good Times Older*, his starkly lit solo debut of



stripped-back traditional songs, arrives so certain of itself it's difficult to believe it isn't some overlooked vintage Topic label treasure, like Chris Foster's *Layers*, that intrigued teenage seekers in well-stocked municipal libraries during the early 1980s synth-pop pestilence. "I have my dogs and my ferrets too," sings Sharp, finding a way to make the hoary old Gamekeeper young again. Here are soldiers, maids and poachers, hanging suspended in Sharp's hands, avatars of the same waking English dream weaponised by Brexit's less scrupulous champions. But who will sing folk songs for BAME key workers, NHS martyrs and brave binmen?



For six years, in his Lake District lab, Jonathan Sharp has also grappled with national identity, creating alternate sonic histories of our sinister 1970s with primitive synths, annexing the era's wyrd

children's television and information films. His Heartwood Institute is a late flowering of the hauntological movement spearheaded by the Ghost Box label and Richard Littler's tonally acute *Discovering Scarfolk* book. A collaboration with American opposite number Panamint Manse, *Parapsychedelia* offers retro-synth evidence for the existence of The Mobius Group, a Californian company that aimed to monetise the predictive powers of psychics. Readers ready to abandon their physical objects, virus-schooled in the need for a quick getaway, may yet be seduced by the red vinyl edition of *Parapsychedelia*, complete with copious Mobius Group paperwork. A Jeff Wayne's *War Of The Worlds* for the *Black Mirror* generation.



An antidote to *Parapsychedelia*'s sleeve-worn sophistication comes in the form of *Reverberations Volume*



One, an unvarnished, 15-year-old, two-hour rehearsal room recording from Bristol's indestructible space rock Stooges acolytes The Heads, that reminds us what rock'n'roll is for. No less than two 17-minute stabs at the transcendently stomach-churning acid-fuzz epic "Creating In The Eternal Now Is Always Heavy" suggest William Blake's infernal method applied to Detroit proto-punk in a cesspit of hiss. The fool who persists in his folly will become wise.

Finally, a compact live document from The Frees – a duo drawn from the Stoke Newington bands Penthouse and Gin Palace now transplanted to Australia – is the downloadable night out you're currently denied. Taking that Birthday Party/Beasts Of Bourbon gutter blues sound back to its source, Jon Free picks out trembling blue licks that Mississippi Fred McDowell would also have



recognised, admittedly through a distorted haze. Howlin' Meaghan Free extemporises apocalyptically on the bush fires which, back in December when *Live From The End Of The Earth* was recorded in Melbourne, were the worst thing then imaginable. I wish I were there now, or somewhere like it, drunk and crushed among the faithful, jabbered at by some sloppy kid, and one day I will be again. Punk rock till I die. 🎧

**John Edwards**, *Just Another Day At Home ...*, [johnedwards.bandcamp.com](http://johnedwards.bandcamp.com)

**Adam Bohman & Douglas Benford**, *Ad Hoc And Words*,  
[dbenford.bandcamp.com](http://dbenford.bandcamp.com)

**Laura Cannell**, *The Earth With Her Crowns* (Brawl Records), [lauracannell.co.uk](http://lauracannell.co.uk)

**Jack Sharp**, *Good Times Older* (From Here Records), [fromhererecords.com](http://fromhererecords.com)

**The Heartwood Institute & Panamint Manse**, *Parapsychedelia* (Castles In Space), [heheartwoodinstituteandpanamintmanse.bandcamp.com](http://heheartwoodinstituteandpanamintmanse.bandcamp.com)

**The Heads**, *Reverberations Volume One* (Cardinal Fuzz), [cful.bandcamp.com](http://cful.bandcamp.com)

**The Frees**, *Live From The End Of The Earth* (Wild Animals Records),  
[wildanimalsrecords.bandcamp.com](http://wildanimalsrecords.bandcamp.com)





Deemed “the most interesting building in this part of Norfolk” by Pevsner, Voewood is the work of architect Edward Schroder Prior in full imaginative flight



Idle home

# Estate of the art

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*Georgina Williams visits a grand Arts and Crafts house that abounds with surprises and delights*

**D**OTTED along the marsh-fringed north coast of Norfolk are a host of ancient villages and market towns. Happily unspoilt by the Industrial Revolution, they remain authentic and characterful, conforming to the conventional architecture of the county.

Among them, however, at High Kelling, just east of Holt, lies a house that is spectacularly non-conformist and completely unique – Voewood. Even its name is singular – lyrical, medieval, evoking a place of chivalry, romance and mystery. There is no hint of the house from the road; a heavy screen of woodland conceals this flight of fantasy from the outside world and enhances its secrecy and seclusion.

Voewood is bewitching. One of the finest Arts and Crafts houses in Britain, it was described by Pevsner as “By far the most interesting building in this part of Norfolk... lavish and at the same time violently idiosyncratic.” It was

commissioned in 1903 by the Reverend Percy Lloyd, who had inherited a fortune from his family’s printing and publishing empire. Lloyd’s life was interwoven with many of the Pre-Raphaelite and Arts and Crafts luminaries and he commissioned Edward Schroder Prior, a suitably radical architect, to design a home for him and his wife that combined not only the principles of the Arts and Crafts movement but the latest advances in technology. Prior was an original thinker and distinguished architect, who had cut his teeth at the esteemed practice of Richard Norman Shaw. He was fascinated with vernacular architecture and relished the generosity and artistic freedom that the Lloyd commission allowed. He’d previously designed smaller houses on a “butterfly” plan – in which the central portion of the house is flanked by splayed wings – but now he really let his imagination take flight.



The result is thrilling. At first sight Voewood appears handsome but unremarkable, a large country house of mellow brick and flint, with beautiful barley-twist chimney-stacks, leaded windows and a towering porch. However, as you venture further, this “butterfly house” begins to work its magic. The building gradually unfolds,

in layers and levels, with two vast wings radiating out from a central great hall, merging into garden walls and covered walkways which encompass acres of heavenly gardens. The house melds seamlessly into the land that surrounds it and surprises and delights at every turn.



Nestled in the countryside, Voewood is designed on a “butterfly plan” in which the central portion of the house is flanked with wings





Prior made a sunken garden to excavate local stones and, in the hands of local master craftsmen, put them to decorative use

The Arts and Crafts movement championed using local materials wherever possible and the first thing Prior did was excavate almost an acre of ground to the south of the plot which in time became the sunken garden. There he found a bounty of building materials, very nearly all he needed – flint, pebbles, gravel and sand – and

employed local master craftsmen to put them to best use. The abundance of gravel prompted him to use reinforced concrete to create the main structure, while the flint and pebbles were used, along with tiles and sandstone, to face the external walls in rough and lively patterns.



It took three years to construct and the result was Prior's most successful domestic building. Voewood was a triumph; a visually stunning, complex yet comfortable country house, fitted with the very latest conveniences and surrounded by breathtaking gardens. Incredible then that, on completion, the Lloyds decided not to move in, put off by the proximity of a new tuberculosis sanatorium. It was sold on unceremoniously, first to a boys' school and then to various institutions when finally, in 1998, after years as a nursing home, it was rescued by Simon Finch, a dealer in rare books.

As a collector with a passion for houses, adventure and life, Finch has proved to be a perfect match for Voewood. He had the vision to see the potential of the house and the appetite to take on its daunting restoration; stripping out years of institutional paraphernalia and revealing the light-filled, considered spaces as well as the beautiful solid bones of Prior's original plan.

The initial restoration and renovation took eight years. Taking a cue from the spirit of artistic freedom that Prior had so clearly enjoyed, as well as the ethos of the Bloomsbury group, Finch set about engaging friends, artists and craftsmen to put their mark on Voewood. The result is an eclectic anthology of styles, which is a fitting

tribute to Prior's adventurous, anarchic work.

One of those whom Finch enlisted was his longtime friend and collaborator Annabel Grey. A textile designer and artist, Grey had worked on a number of his other properties but never on anything like the scale of Voewood. She became its principal designer, choosing paint colours, designing textiles and repurposing furniture and objects from Finch's extensive collection, as well as gathering new pieces at auctions and markets. Almost 20 years on, many of the rooms remain unchanged, while others, such as a party room in the basement, are being planned – a tribute to the success of the original renovation and to their enduring creative partnership.

Grey obviously had fun reflecting the tactile, characterful exterior of the house on the inside and a key feature is her use of materials to decorate surfaces: pebbles, buttons, mosaics and even fragments of smashed china are used to great effect throughout. Several bathrooms are decorated with exuberant mosaic flowers, others are adorned with pebbles or buttons, and the entire floor of an enclosed loggia next to the dining room features a dazzling fish mosaic, the first Grey executed and a real labour of love.

Elsewhere in the house are the





Reimagining the interiors, contemporary architect Annbel Grey was inspired by Prior's vision, turning the floor of the loggia into a fish mosaic



sort of original, bespoke touches that set this place apart and honour its artistic spirit – such as the unique designs hand-painted by Grey on many of the walls and curtains. In one bedroom – hers during much of the renovation – she has painstakingly painted hundreds of squares of pastel colours onto the walls, interspersed

with silver leaf, resulting in a striking Klimt-like patchwork. Downstairs in the music room she used layer upon layer of white oil paint to create almost imperceptible elliptical shapes on the walls which act as a perfect backdrop to Finch's collection of African artefacts.

Connections with other local artists are evident too. The Green





bedroom has been transformed into a pastoral idyll, with pea green walls and a profusion of hollyhocks, painted by Chloe Mandy. In the dining room Grey joined forces with textile designer Kirsten Hecktermann to create ravishing curtains; generous hand-dyed velvet drops appliquéd with butterflies and moths, referencing those in

Finch's original collection.

Each room has a unique vibe, emanating from its function or location or inspired by an object or work of art. Period and style are juxtaposed: Bauhaus and Bloomsbury, country and gentleman's club, African and seaside, kitsch and elegant. A Rietveld chair is perfectly at home

Grey's designs act as a perfect backdrop for homeowner Simon Finch's collection of African artefacts







This tasteful interior brings a whole new meaning to the words  
“pebble-dashing the bathroom”

in the downstairs loo; a group of mallard ducks form an orderly queue above the dresser in the country kitchen. One landing is home to a Bocca lips sofa, the other to classic Lloyd Loom. This collision of styles shouldn't work but, in the unique atmosphere of

Voewood, it really does.

The constantly evolving interior is as eccentric, multi-faceted and witty as the exterior. Created a century apart, they form an intoxicating blend that is a perfect reflection of both its creator and, now, its custodian. 🌀



## Buy George

### Voewood

Voewood is available to hire. With its great hall, 17 bedrooms and extensive gardens, it makes a spectacular venue for parties, retreats and weddings. Explore the possibilities at [voewood.com](http://voewood.com)

### Voewood Rare Books

Simon Finch has established an outpost for his secondhand and antiquarian book business at Voewood. Open by appointment, much of the eclectic collection is also available online.

[voewoodrarebooks.com](http://voewoodrarebooks.com)

### Textiles and designs by Annabel Grey

Most of the textiles Annabel designed for Voewood are unique, but she does sell a range of her jaunty Daisy oil cloth, featured on the kitchen table, as well as other fabrics, online and at the design collective Verandah that she runs in Holt.

[annabelgrey.co.uk](http://annabelgrey.co.uk) and [@verandah.holt](https://twitter.com/verandah.holt)

### Paintings by Chloe Mandy

Norfolk-based artist Chloe painted the Green room at Voewood. For information on exhibitions and commissions visit [chloemandyart.com](http://chloemandyart.com)

### Textiles by Kirsten Hecktermann

Hand-dyed cotton velvets and other sumptuous textiles are available from Kirsten's online shop, as well as embroidered commissions.

[kirstenhecktermann.com](http://kirstenhecktermann.com)

### Mosaics

Mosaics are featured throughout Voewood on bath panels, mirrors, basins and floors. Mosaic Heaven is a family-run business based in Market Deeping, Lincolnshire, which supplies a huge range of mosaic tiles and tool kits online at [mosaicheaven.com](http://mosaicheaven.com)

### Arts and Craft furniture and objects

Among the diverse styles at Voewood are many exceptional Arts and Craft pieces. There are specialist dealers throughout the UK, including Hill House Antiques, based in London, which has pieces by CFA Voysey and WAS Benson among its collection. [hillhouse-antiques.co.uk](http://hillhouse-antiques.co.uk)



# Football

## Wreckless Eric



*Percy Preston looks back at the career of the dazzlingly talented, enigmatic, silly, sometimes violent but always non-conformist Eric Cantona*

TWENTY-FIVE years ago Eric Cantona, one of the greatest footballers ever to play in England, said: “When the seagulls follow a trawler, it’s because they think sardines will be thrown into the sea. Thank you.”

The occasion for Cantona’s words? A press conference in the lobby of a chain hotel in Croydon, South London. An unlikely venue for history-making. The conference was held by Manchester United, Cantona’s club at the time, after he had been convicted of assault for karate-kicking an opposition fan during a game against Crystal Palace in January 1995. It was supposed to be a staged apology. Cantona didn’t stick to the script.

What’s largely been lost in the subsequent analyses of Cantona’s words – and thousands have been committed to print in an effort to decipher his meaning – is that by his own admission shortly afterwards, what he said was a load

of bollocks: “It did not mean anything, I could have said: ‘The curtains are pink but I love them.’”

Why, then, did he say it? Watching the video of the press conference, it’s clear that Cantona is enjoying the occasion. At one point, mid-sentence, he takes a sip of water to stop himself laughing. It’s a joke, but it’s also more than that: Cantona’s faux philosophical utterance is an assertion of non-conformity.

In post-match interviews, on their social media accounts and at award ceremonies, players earnestly repeat the footballing Newspeak fed to them by their club’s PR people: “The team played well”; “I’m just glad to have helped the team”; “We take every game as it comes”; “I’m humbled by this award”. These earnest clichés are more than just mind-numbingly dull: they make players automatons, incapable of expressing a real opinion. Their individuality flattened by cliché,



footballers are made sufficiently anodyne for their commercial sponsors and clubs, who are all terrified of controversy.

But Cantona is different. He is defiantly himself. Seeds of his distinctiveness were planted in his upbringing. His maternal grandfather was an anti-fascist resistance fighter in the Spanish Civil War who had fled to France. His father was a painter. From the former he inherited a distrust of authority; from the latter, a romantic view of football as way of creating and appreciating beauty. How many other players could say: “I have never and will never find any difference between the pass from Pelé to Carlos Alberto in the final of the World Cup in 1970, and the poetry of the young Rimbaud”?

But he could do much more than just talk a good game. Cantona’s words were not controlled by anyone. And on the pitch he was just as irrepressible. His finest moments on the field were rejections of authority. Perhaps the highlight – and there are many – is his chipped goal in swirling winds against Sheffield United in the third round of the FA Cup in 1995. It’s an outrageous “up yours” to received coaching wisdom and indeed to the weather; you’re supposed to keep the ball on the ground when it’s windy, not chip the keeper from 30 yards.

Post-retirement, Cantona has continued his one-man war on the ordinary. His departure from the game was itself unusual: he exited at 30, at the peak of his footballing powers, to pursue a career as an actor. He’s since starred in a number of stage productions and films, set up his own production company focused on making documentaries, lived in Barcelona, Marseille and now Lisbon with his second wife and two children from that marriage and, perhaps most famously, starred in *Looking For Eric*, Ken Loach’s Palme d’Or-nominated picture about a football fanatic who hallucinates Cantona offering him counsel and consolation during his crises. Most ex-footballers become coaches.

In 2019, UEFA – the governing body for European football – decided to honour Cantona with the President’s Award, given in recognition of “outstanding achievements, professional excellence and exemplary personal qualities”. Cantona was a left-field choice from UEFA, the guardians of modern football’s bland commercialism. Though Cantona’s achievements in the game are undeniable – he won four Premier League titles and two FA Cups at Manchester United – his “professional excellence” and “exemplary personal qualities” might be queried. During his



career, the man that Manchester United fans call the “King” had at times behaved less than regally. In 1987 he was fined for punching a teammate in the face; the following year he was suspended for a dropkick tackle on an opposition player; in 1989 he kicked the ball into the crowd during a friendly match; in 1991 he was suspended for a month for throwing a ball at a referee; he threw a boot in the face of a teammate while playing for Montpellier and of course there was his karate kick at Selhurst Park.

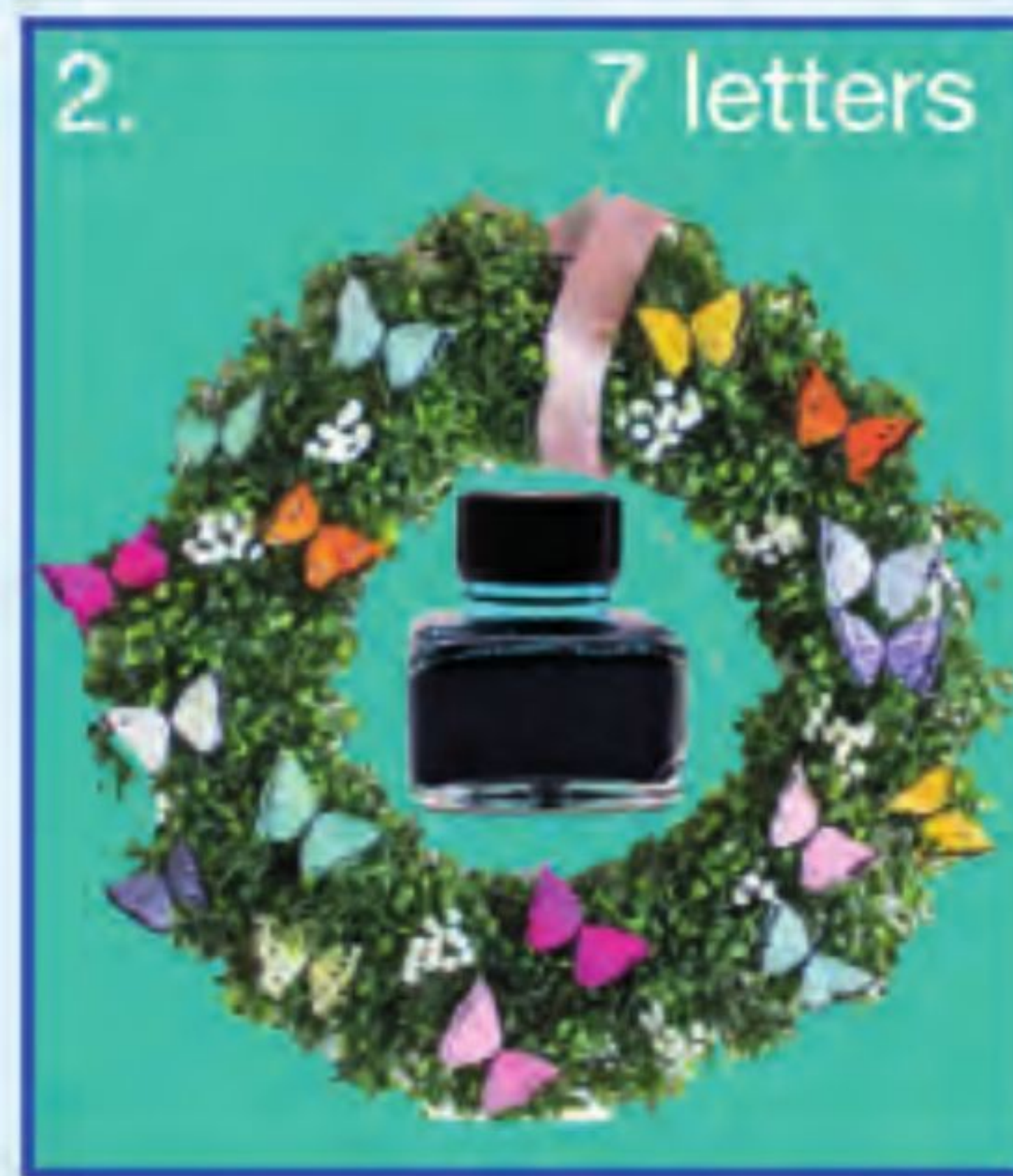
Receiving his award from UEFA, Cantona was invited to make a speech. He arrived on stage wearing a flat cap and a pink open-neck polo shirt and chinos. Everyone else attending the event was wearing a suit. Cantona began with a quotation from *King Lear* – common parlance for an actor, but not for footballers – “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods. They kill us for their sport” – before moving on to discuss the possibility of bioengineered immortality in the near future. Sensing he was losing his audience, he concluded with: “I love football.”

This is Cantona at his gnomish best, making no sense, but in doing so, delivering a bigger message about the absurdity of the occasion and the vanity of the footballing authorities assembled that evening.

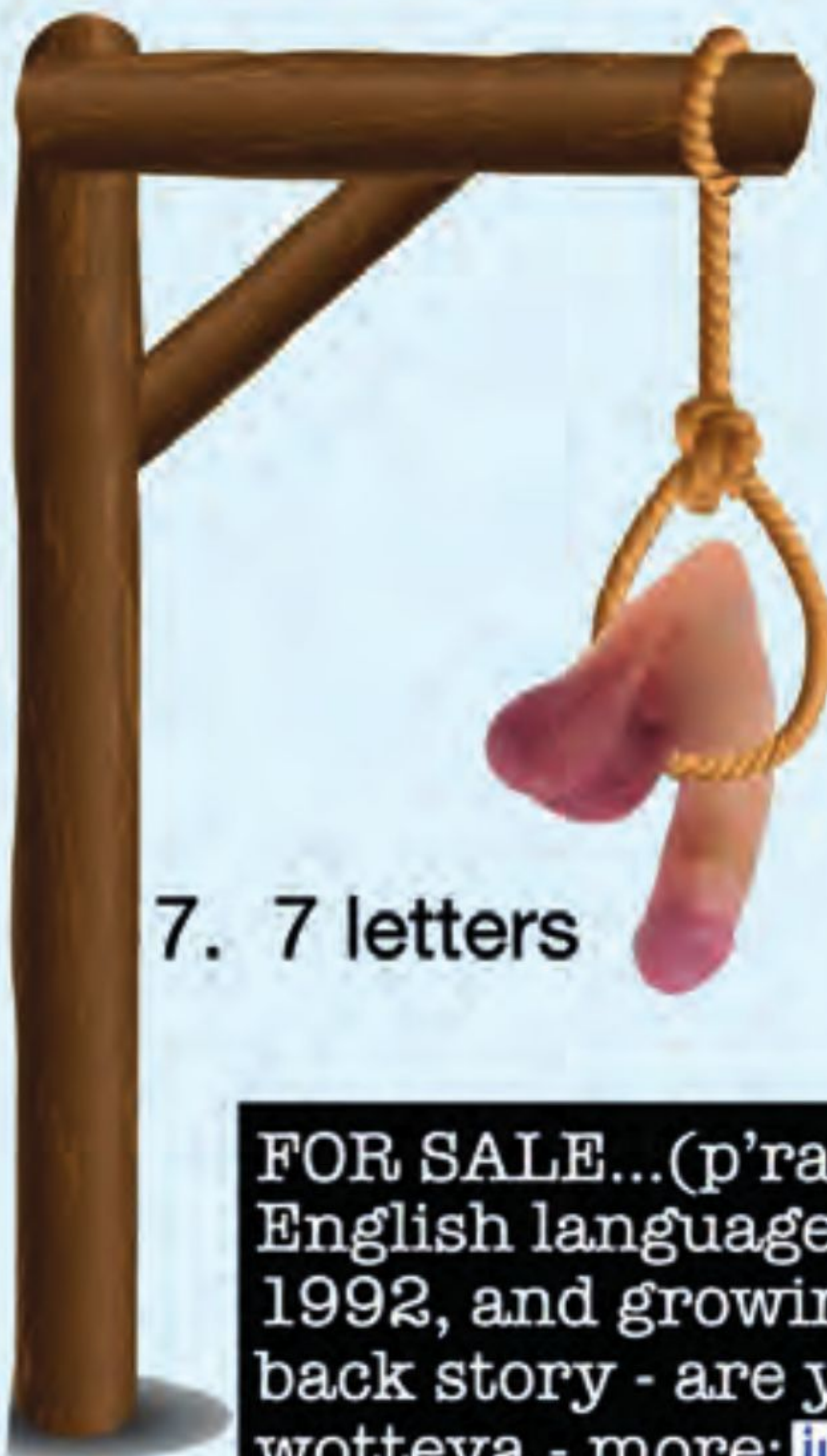
It’s a shame, but perhaps

inevitable, that over time Cantona’s reputation as a footballer has become a hostage to cliché. He is the brooding, yin and yang Frenchman who lurched from genius to madness. But perhaps this is why Cantona chose to exit football. Speaking to the *Guardian* in 2012, Cantona made clear that he didn’t feel the need to bask in past glories. “Some people need to stay at the top; they are afraid to restart from zero because they fear the critics ... But I think I have enough humour and enough humility about life. I don’t take life so seriously ... I can just play with life.” Not a sentiment you’re likely to hear anytime soon from the corporate, sanitised Premier League players of today. Their loss, and ours. 🌀





*Juan Whirred* -  
find the **one word** in each  
rebus - answers below ...



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1.ionise 2.rethink 3.polemical 4.Kardashian 5.climax 6.Bonaparte 7.Hancock 8. Hancock 9.Hosanna 10.pandemic



## Travel

# Should I stay or should I go?

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Richard Hammond *looks at what the new normal might be for when we want to get away from it all*

THE moment the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office advised against all non-essential overseas travel in mid-March, bang went the nation's plans for Easter holidays spent waking up to fresh-from-the-boulangerie croissants, swooshing down quiet, late-season ski slopes or taking a first dip of the year in a secluded Mediterranean cove. Having the right to travel temporarily taken away from us may have left some travellers questioning old habits, but for others it's likely only to have incubated a renewed enthusiasm to dust off their passports when restrictions are lifted. Given the constraints that will inevitably be enforced in the new normal, how does the future of travel look?

After the lockdown eased in China, the first thing people wanted to spend money on was eating out. Next, according to a report by management consultants McKinsey, the Chinese started

travelling, albeit close to home. It's likely that we can expect a similar trend in the UK, with staycations set to thrive as people in search of some level of isolation, and plenty of fresh air, book self-catering cottages, campsites and holiday parks; expect places on the coast and in and around National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty to be in high demand.

Within the travel industry, this is an opportunity to promote domestic tourism like never before. The travel company Kuoni, previously known for selling luxury long-haul breaks to the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, has launched a series of holidays in the UK and Ireland for the first time in its 100-year history, while Samantha Richardson of the National Coastal Tourism Academy (NCTA) says demand from domestic consumers for coastal breaks could open up entirely new audiences. Before the pandemic, NCTA research found





[© England's Coast]

that only around a fifth of under-35s were interested in coastal getaways as a holiday choice. Surveys carried out since then however suggest this has changed for millennials and there are opportunities to be had “in coastal areas that can adapt to meet the needs of this market”. For Richardson, who is spearheading the Year Of The English Coast campaign in 2021 (one highlight of which will be the launch of the English Coast Path National Trail), this broadening of the market might also include a jettisoning of traditional seasonality, with many businesses thought to be planning to stay open beyond the

usual holiday season to try to recoup losses.

Among both coastal dwellers and landlubbers, demand for hyper-local travel is also likely to blossom. With the easing of the lockdown many would-be travellers are discovering new day-tripping destinations on their doorsteps, from walking and cycling routes to wild swimming sites, wildlife-watching trails and picturesque picnic spots. The Ordnance Survey is helping on this with the online publication of the crowd-sourced SlowWays project – a creation of explorer Dan Raven-Ellison aimed at getting people walking between



Scarborough at night, Yorkshire



[© England's Coast]

British villages and towns rather than using their cars. So far over 700 volunteers have created 7,000 routes, stretching more than 100,000km.

For travellers willing to re-embrace public transport and follow social distancing rules (which will apply not only to how we use transport but will also affect how we visit restaurants, pubs and visitor attractions such as museums and leisure centres), the Good Journey website ([goodjourney.org.uk](http://goodjourney.org.uk)) will be another useful resource, outlining how to reach attractions across the UK by train, bus, bike and foot. Many destination managers will be encouraging these initiatives,

the pandemic having offered them time to reflect on new models of operation – how to avoid overcrowding in a particular destination, making cities more pedestrian and cycle-friendly, and swapping spontaneous sightseeing for pre-booked slots at visitor attractions, museums and galleries (which might just make the experience more enjoyable for all).

On a wider scale it's the city-breakers and the hyper-mobile who'll be impacted the most, according to Graham Miller, professor of sustainability in business at the University of Surrey. Not only will more leisure travellers be seeking out the perceived cleaner air and isolation of rural



Boating on the Broads, East Coast



[© England's Coast]

destinations, but business travellers frequently flying to international city conference hubs such as Amsterdam, Barcelona and Vancouver are likely to find their globe-trotting restricted as companies put the squeeze on corporate junkets and make the most of online software.

Miller also believes that travel will become more intra-regional. One thing is sure: new regulations around international travel, including possible delays caused by health-check control mechanisms at airports, will make us more aware of the purpose of our trips and encourage us to be more conscious of the kinds of holidays we take and the impact they have on the

destinations we visit. The result may be more travellers taking fewer trips but ones that are longer, slower and more sustainable.

I for one can't wait to get exploring again. Top of my wish list is a slow train trip through Europe, kicking off with a Lavender Dusk cocktail in the Eurostar departure lounge, waking up to an early-morning view of Alpine peaks over a strong Italian coffee and ending with the promise of the Aegean shimmering away at the end of the line. 🌊

*Richard Hammond is a writer and filmmaker and founder of [greentraveller.co.uk](http://greentraveller.co.uk), which provides information on low-carbon holidays.*



# Spirits

## Explosive stuff

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*Added to energy drinks, the German liqueur Jägermeister goes down a bomb with young revellers. But, as Joseph Piercy reveals, there's a murky history to this party favourite*

IN the 17th and 18th centuries the chocolate-box town of Wolfenbüttel in Lower Saxony, northern Germany, had a reputation as a vibrant centre for art, culture and enlightened thinking. The town is home to the internationally renowned Herzog August Library, which boasts one of the largest collections of medieval manuscripts in Europe. The philosopher Gottfried Leibniz spent 27 years as chief librarian there, establishing the library's standing for excellence in research and scholarly learning. Wolfenbüttel is also the birthplace and home of Jägermeister, a sickly sweet herbal liqueur that is the “get wrecked quick” shot of choice among students aged 18 to 21, not least when combined with energy drinks to produce the pseudo cocktail of fearsome hangover potential known as the Jäger Bomb. Beyond the youthful hedonism of the student

union bar and the shrewd sponsorship of festivals, arena rock concert tours and glitzy major sporting events however, the Jägermeister brand has a more than murky past that it has very carefully concealed with clever marketing.

Given the town's historical reputation for progressive and liberal values, it seems curiously counter-intuitive that in 1922 Wolfenbüttel became the first constituency outside of Bavaria to elect an NSDAP (Nazi Party) candidate to the German parliament. By the early 1930s the National Socialists had developed into a leading political force in Lower Saxony. The district of Wolfenbüttel, with its wide open spaces, rolling hills and forests, was one of the centres for the Nazis' *Kraft Durch Freude* (“Strength Through Joy”) programme, a politically motivated, state-operated leisure company that gave ordinary



German workers on low incomes the chance to indulge in rural outdoor pursuits such as camping, hunting, shooting and fishing, while sporting leather shorts and guzzling beer. Several leading lights of the Nazi Party attended KDF shindigs, with Joseph Goebbels noting in his diaries “the tremendous fun” that was had by all.

Wolfenbüttel was also the hometown of local businessman and conservative politician Curt Mast. Mast had inherited the Findel-Mast family business in 1917 but the economic crisis in Germany after World War I the company teetered on the brink of bankruptcy. Originally a vinegar factory, Mast turned the business into a distillery and began producing herbal liqueurs, restoratives and *digestifs* of dubious quality and medicinal value. A hunting enthusiast, Mast is believed to have met Hermann Göring at a KDF event in the early 1930s and, the two men became firm friends. Mast was a deputy minister in the local parliament, representing the *Deutsche Volkspartei* (DVP), a rival German nationalist group to the Nazis. On 1 May 1933, Mast left the DVP and joined the National Socialists. The reasons behind his change of allegiance are a matter of conjecture. Political instability could have forced him into joining

the National Socialists – *Deutsche Volkspartei* had been losing seats and supporters to the Nazis for over a decade so he was perhaps leaving a sinking ship. Mast claimed after the War he was simply a businessman wishing to exploit the powerful contacts that being a member of the party provided. The latter is certainly true of his association with Göring.

In 1934, Göring’s role as interior minister allowed him to pass a private hunting bill known as the *Reichsjagdgesetz* (Reich Hunting Laws). Alongside the usual Nazi obsessions with building hierarchies of power (the law created regional Jägermeisters or “Master Hunters” to act as administrators) stood some surprisingly progressive reforms in animal rights. Hunting with dogs on horseback was banned, the killing of vixens with cubs was also outlawed and strict licensing controls were introduced. Some historians have noted that Hitler and Göring’s hunting regulations were merely part of a concerted attack upon the German aristocracy and the bourgeoisie whom Göring in particular despised.

Curt Mast was appointed as a Jägermeister and organised hunting parties for leading Nazi dignitaries at the *Reichsjägerhof*, one of Göring’s hunting lodges. Sensing an opportunity to rebuild his business interests, Mast rebranded



the herbal liqueur that his company produced as the official drink of the hunt, renaming it Jägermeister. Mast also changed the logo to a rather tetchy looking stag and added the opening lines of a popular 19th-century poem about the honour and glory of the hunt by Oskar von Riesenthal, a former royal gamekeeper, to the label:

*This is the hunter's badge of glory:  
That he protects and tends  
his quarry,  
Hunts with honour, as is due,  
And through the beast to God  
is true.*

The popularity of Jägermeister increased markedly during the years leading up to World War II, fully justifying Mast's rebranding. It also became very popular with leading members of the German military – so much so that during the War it was often referred to by the nickname “Göring-Schnapps” on account of bottles of it being distributed in the basic rations of Luftwaffe pilots, no doubt at *Reichsmarschall* Göring's request.

At the end of the war, Mast was summoned to appear before the British military governor of Wolfenbüttel and called to account for his Nazi associations. Somehow Mast managed to convince the governor that he was never actually a fully fledged member of the party

and so was not put on trial. Mast was fortunate that he faced a British military tribunal, members of which possibly had interests in hunting – it's doubtful a Russian or American tribunal would have viewed his Nazi connections with quite such clemency.

Mast returned to politics a few years later as a member of parliament for the Christian Democratic Union, although the popularity of Jägermeister declined and the drink slipped into obscurity. On his death in 1970, the company passed into the hands of his nephew Günter, who set about rebranding the drink again. Under Günter Mast's direction, Jägermeister was marketed at a new, younger demographic and targeted at hip clubs and bars. Astute corporate sponsorship of major events such as music festivals (including Bestival and All Points East in the UK) and international motor racing meetings, coupled with the wholesale flooding of the student market, has seen the brand go from strength to strength and mask the uncomfortable fact that the drink was originally created to be enthusiastically guzzled at Hermann Göring's hunting parties. 🍷





# Beer

## Summer sipping

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*Oli Meade's got the hops for you*

WITHOUT wanting to dwell on the obvious, summer 2020 feels like no summer before. Hopefully as you read this the sun is shining and, while your industrious neighbours busy themselves revamping gardens and installing patios, you're lazing around in true idler style. You'll need good beer to complement your summer lounging, of course, so I have one or two suggestions to make.

If possible, hunt out a can or two of DEYA's Steady Rolling Man. It's difficult to put into words what makes this beer so alluring. It could be the whimsical musician on the can. Even more likely is the seemingly careless extra 60ml of the stuff you get, pushing the volume up to half a litre. Perhaps it's the uncompromisingly subtle yet floral liquid inside? Or all of the above and more packaged together?

Whichever way you look at it, DEYA have nailed the summer pale ale here. Many claim it's the best in Britain. It's proved so

popular via my website I've had to impose a limit of two cans per order. It's not all that easy to come by. If you get the chance, grab a can, light a roll-up and prepare your uke for an evening in the garden, man.

If either of the next two recommendations have made it onto your radar already, congrats. You are truly a beer king. I say as much because, for me at least, both are what I'd call "I told you they would be amazing back in summer 2020!" beers. If you too are so insecure that you try to impress strangers with frightfully useless beer knowledge, then take note, first of all, of S43 Brewery. S43 have been kicking about since 2012 but have made a serious impression in the last six months. After rebranding (the brewery was formerly Sonnet 43 – a nod to the local Durham poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning), S43 have focused on getting their beers out into the wider world. Previously, the brewers were cask champions. Today they make the



kind of modern and hazy juice-bombs that advancing markets applaud. Fortunately, the new focus seems to be more than a marketing ploy: the brewers themselves admit that their tastes have evolved as modern beers have emerged.

Keep half an eye out for their Snickers-themed *You're Not You When You're Thirsty* (a 9% peanut butter fudge stout), but do actively seek out *Juice Cannon* this summer. The latter is one for the sunshine. As the name suggests, the beer is tropical and fruity with popular notes of passionfruit and mango. Somehow, it's also smooth and creamy. Best enjoyed from a deck chair.

The second of my "new" breweries to look out for is Pentrich Brewing. Thinking about it, you'd be forgiven for mixing these guys up with the reborn S43. For one thing the cans themselves are similar, and Pentrich is also another "long-standing" craft brewery that's been chugging along since before the true craft beer boom. The tale is a familiar one: in 2013, beer lovers and home brewers Joe and Ryan wondered if they could make a buck from doing something they enjoyed. And it's fair to say the growing team have smashed it since inception. The founders are hardly in a position to retire just yet (even if they wanted to), but their beers are so damn good that, if they

garner half the attention they deserve, it won't be long before these chaps have that option.

Pentrich's moniker comes from the Derbyshire town where the beer is made, the best of the bunch being the aptly named *Birthdays In Isolation*. This is a 10% Imperial IPA made with a smash-bang-wallop of Citra, Simcoe and Nelson hops. Don't be afraid of an overpowering ABV. *Birthdays In Isolation* will blow more than your socks off on the flavour front.

My last recommendation for summer 2020 brings us back full circle. We started with a much-talked-of must-have in DEYA's *Steady Rolling Man*. Arise by Burning Sky snuggles into the same corner. Without wanting (or at least intending) to create a theme here, Burning Sky is another brewery that straddles the "old" and "new" beer worlds. Still incredible cask producers, Burning Sky brewers aren't afraid to both embrace the traditional and plough on with the modern. It's a philosophy that ensures all Burning Sky beers deliver, cask or keg. With Arise the brewery has a flagship pale that's hard to fault. It's as bright and hoppy as you'd hope, and is just the right side of ripe and flowery. At 4.4% it's far from a monster, and the fruity notes from the hops sit in perfect harmony with the malt bill. Glorious and easy-drinking, it's a





perfect summer pale ale.

Grab yourself one of the above. Or grab them all. Then sit back and let the bees buzz (note: Bill Anderson's column will likely have more appropriate advice) and the

long evenings whisper on. Happy drinking and stay safe out there. 🍷

*Oli owns and runs the online beer shop and taproom Craft Metropolis. You may be able to pick up one or two of the above via [craftmetropolis.co.uk](https://craftmetropolis.co.uk)*



## Recipe

# The beet goes on



*Filmmaker Nora Meyer uses up old veg to make a big sustaining pot of beetroot soup*

**N**ORA Meyer writes: I love beetroot and have been tweaking versions of this soup for years. I made this for the first time in lockdown with unpromising ingredients. The starting point was a bag of two-week-old squishy beetroot, bendy root vegetables and yogurt a month past its sell-by date. As usual, a stash of spices came to the rescue. And the result was amazing. Best I've made by far.

It's equally delicious hot or cold. A swirl of garlicky yogurt and some chopped herbs thrown on at the last minute brought it to life. I like to make a big pot and eat different versions of it on later days. On day one, I might have a large bowl of hot soup with toast and a side salad. Then for lunch later in the week, a small bowl with different herbs and spices added, together with an open sandwich (maybe tinned tuna with leftover salsa verde.)

This makes a big pot – a meal for four with salad and bread, with leftovers.

### Nora's smoky beetroot soup

- 3 tbsp olive oil
- 2 medium red onions, roughly chopped
- 4 sticks celery, roughly chopped
- 2 big carrots, or 3 smaller, peeled and roughly chopped
- 4 big beetroots, each about the size of a tennis ball, chopped
- 6 big cloves garlic (or smaller)
- Small bunch parsley, stems chopped, leaves chopped and kept aside
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 tbsp cumin
- 2 tbsp smoked sweet paprika
- 1 medium baking or white potato with skin on, roughly chopped
- 2 litres vegetable stock (I use bouillon powder. You may not need all of it)
- Pinch of salt
- Small tub Greek yogurt
- 2 tbsp balsamic or other sweetish vinegar (sherry vinegar is nice)
- Black pepper
- Handful of chives, or mint, or coriander, or all three





Ideally you want to make this in a big, heavy-bottomed pan you can bring to the table. Pour in the oil, add the chopped onion, celery and carrot, and soften over a low heat. This takes about 15 minutes, depending on your pot. Keep an eye on it. Add a little slosh more oil if it looks like it needs it to stop the veg from browning or crisping up. In the meantime peel and chop your beetroot and peel and bash five of the garlic cloves. When the vegetables are soft, add the chopped parsley stems, bashed garlic, bay, cumin and sweet paprika. After two minutes, add the chopped beetroot and potato, and cover with stock so it's about an inch above the vegetables. Simmer slowly with the lid off for about 45 minutes, or until the beetroot is soft.

Meanwhile, make your garlicky yogurt. Crush a large garlic clove (or two small ones) and sprinkle

with salt. Leave for five minutes for the garlic to soften, add yogurt and keep in the fridge till ready to use.

Back to the soup. When the beetroot is soft, add the balsamic vinegar and chopped parsley leaves. Blitz for a moment with a hand blender if you have one, or a potato masher if not. I like to leave a few chunks in. Taste and add more vinegar, salt or black pepper if you think it needs it. Serve hot with a good dollop of yogurt and roughly chopped soft herbs.

For a spicier version, add the spice mix *za'atar* seasoning and chilli flakes, and a small swirl of pomegranate molasses. Crumbled feta works well too.

If you have any left over, to eat cold, you might want to add a bit more seasoning. 🌀



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# Gardening

## Can you dig it?

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Graham Burnett *on the benefits of creating your own backyard mini-farm*

ONE of the many effects of coronavirus has been to bring into sharp focus the fragility of our current global food production and distribution systems: shortages and queues in our supermarkets and shops for even basic food items have shown all too clearly the need to fundamentally redesign the way we feed ourselves. Although the supply chain didn't quite break this time, it certainly frayed at the edges as bags of flour temporarily became a commodity as scarce as toilet rolls and hand sanitiser.

It's pretty much a given that the old "business as usual" model needs to change and that in many, many ways we won't be going back to how things were before. And so when picturing a more just and solutions-based post-lockdown "new normal", we need to consider re-localising food production on every scale, including learning to grow more produce in our own gardens, allotments or whatever spaces we

can find: just think how much land is potentially available, and the possible contribution to the health, well-being and sustenance of our society we could all make if only we had the land and skills.

As a nation we've been here before. Food shortages caused by import blockades saw the launch of the "Dig For Victory" campaign at the outbreak of war in 1939. Half a million new allotment plots were created virtually overnight and every possible area of spare land was utilised for crop production, including London's Royal Parks – there are wonderful wartime photographs of the grounds of the Tower of London and the land by the Albert Memorial in Kensington Gardens being used as giant vegetable plots. The whole population, including children, was encouraged to participate in the national self-sufficiency drive, with the government producing millions of posters, leaflets and booklets as

Dig for freedom: illustration by Graham Burnett







well as radio broadcasts full of gardening advice. It's estimated that by 1945, allotments and domestic gardens were responsible for growing at least 10 per cent of all food produced in Britain.

This time around, as with many other aspects of the response to the coronavirus crisis, it seems ordinary people are being proactively ahead of the curve of the "leadership" provided by our Government. Just as most of us who saw the pandemic coming stopped going to football matches and pubs at least a couple of weeks before this became official advice, so many began turning their modest backyards into productive mini-smallholdings at the first sign of price-gouged tinned tomatoes in the shops, with online seed and compost suppliers struggling to keep up with demand.

Many people are just getting on with it despite never even having looked at a seed packet before, sticking stuff in the ground and cheerfully hoping for the best. Others are more anxious or lack confidence: "I'd love to grow some vegetables but I just have no clue where to start." Through no fault of our own, as a society we've lost many of the skills of self-reliance our forebears took for granted. The dawning of post-war affluence led to a steady decline in the popularity of allotments and vegetable gardening. For our

parents and even our grandparents cheap food imports and out-of-town supermarkets became the norm with the rise of globalisation. In short, we forgot how to grow our own because we didn't need to any more. But the good news is that actually, it's not that difficult: becoming a competent gardener is like learning to cook – start with the basics and your skills will soon increase.

As well as providing a chance to grow your own healthy, locally produced fruit and vegetables, there are lots of other benefits for yourself, your family, the wider community and the environment. For example, involving your children in growing their own will help them understand where our food really comes from, giving them a real sense of achievement and adding to their self-esteem. Gardening also provides plenty of gentle outdoor exercise that will keep you fit, and is an excellent way of relieving stress and anxiety while enhancing well-being and maybe even your immune system. Who needs expensive health clubs when you've got your own "green gym" in your back garden? Plus not only will you be making considerable savings on your weekly food shopping bill, you'll be driving to the supermarket less, cutting down your food miles and reducing your carbon footprint.



**Getting started: some golden rules**

Really, there's only one way of managing your new garden – and that's your own! But it's always useful to have a few guidelines, especially when faced with the daunting sight of an overgrown plot for the first time ...

- **Don't overdo it.** It's probably better to cultivate a small area thoroughly rather than take on too much and simply exhaust yourself and your enthusiasm.
- **Grow what you like to eat.** There's no point in growing beetroots for example if nobody in your house enjoys them and they end up getting thrown away.
- **Observe what's going on around you.** Ask questions: What are other people doing, and what's working well for them? Learning from the wisdom of others isn't cheating.
- **Fit in with the patterns of the seasons.** Early spring is when the soil starts to warm up and become workable. Late spring and early summer is the main planting time. Things really get busy during midsummer, when everything seems to need watering and weeding at once. Late summer and autumn is when to start relaxing and enjoying your harvest. Then it's winter, time to rest and plan for when the cycle begins again.
- **Feed the soil, not the plant.** Adding compost and organic matter to the soil will improve its structure, moisture-holding capacity and long-term fertility, giving you healthier, better-quality plants in return for your investment.
- **Keep it close.** Grow things you use little and often (salad leaves, fresh herbs) or that require lots of attention (trays of new seedlings that need watering) as near to the kitchen door as possible. If you can't go out on a rainy evening and pick it without getting your pink fluffy slippers wet, you've planted it too far away from the house!
- **Enjoy yourself.** If growing your own isn't a pleasure, then let's face it, it probably isn't worth doing at all. So make it fun and involve all the family and you'll never look back.



Gardening is also a great social activity, strengthening community bonds even when we're physically distant as we share stories, advice and surplus plants. At the time of writing many people around here are using their state-sanctioned exercise period to drop off pots of excess courgette seedlings and leftover onion sets to friends and neighbours. Just now the community garden projects I work with are closed, but we're thinking of innovative ways to help our attendees carry on growing. One idea is to deliver home gardening kits consisting of DIY recycled 30-litre KeyKeg beer containers (see last issue, *Idler* 72), vegetable seeds, potting compost and an instruction booklet to households without garden space, with an invitation to share their efforts on social media in order to stay connected.

For most of us there are of course limits to how much we can realistically grow ourselves, and

however intensively we manage our gardens, allotments and window boxes, our spaces won't supply all of our food needs. But by taking responsibility for growing at least some of our own we can play an active role in reskilling ourselves, reinventing our relationships with the land and reimagining how we connect between growers and producers in order to create future food systems that are abundant, fair and resilient. 🌱

*Graham Burnett is a permaculture activist and teacher, and the author of Permaculture: A Beginner's Guide and The Vegan Book Of Permaculture. His booklet Top Of The Crops: How To Make Your Edible Garden Grow is available as a free download from [spiralseed.co.uk](http://spiralseed.co.uk)*



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# Beekeeping Hexed



*Bill Anderson waxes lyrical about the wonders of honeycomb building, and what we can learn from it*

IN 36 BC Marcus Terentius Varro came up with the Honeycomb Conjecture – the idea that a hexagon was the best way to divide a surface into regions of equal area with the least total perimeter. But it wasn't until 1999 that mathematician Thomas C Hales finally turned conjecture into mathematical proof with the elegant and catchy theorem:

But turning eight tiny flakes of dandruff-like wax that you exude from glands on your abdomen into accommodation of breathtaking architectural brilliance requires construction skills that we have yet to fathom. How do bees with a brain smaller than one of those wax flakes build thousands upon thousands of consistently perfect hexagons?

Let  $\Gamma$  be a locally finite graph in  $\mathbb{R}^2$ , consisting of smooth curves, and such that  $\mathbb{R}^2 \setminus \Gamma$  has infinitely many bounded connected components, all of unit area. Let  $C$  be the union of these bounded components.

$$\limsup_{r \rightarrow \infty} \frac{\text{perimeter}(C \cap B(0, r))}{\text{area}(C \cap B(0, r))} \geq \sqrt[3]{12}.$$

Equality is attained for the regular hexagonal tile.

Presumably something similar to this has been good enough for honeybees for the last 15 million years, during which they've been building hexagonal combs that use the minimum material to make the strongest structure that protects the maximum volume. The comb is both a crib for their young and where they store their food – the present and the future in wax.



An attractive conjecture came out of Cardiff University in 2013: bees didn't need protractors to measure the angles of a hexagon, they just needed to build circular

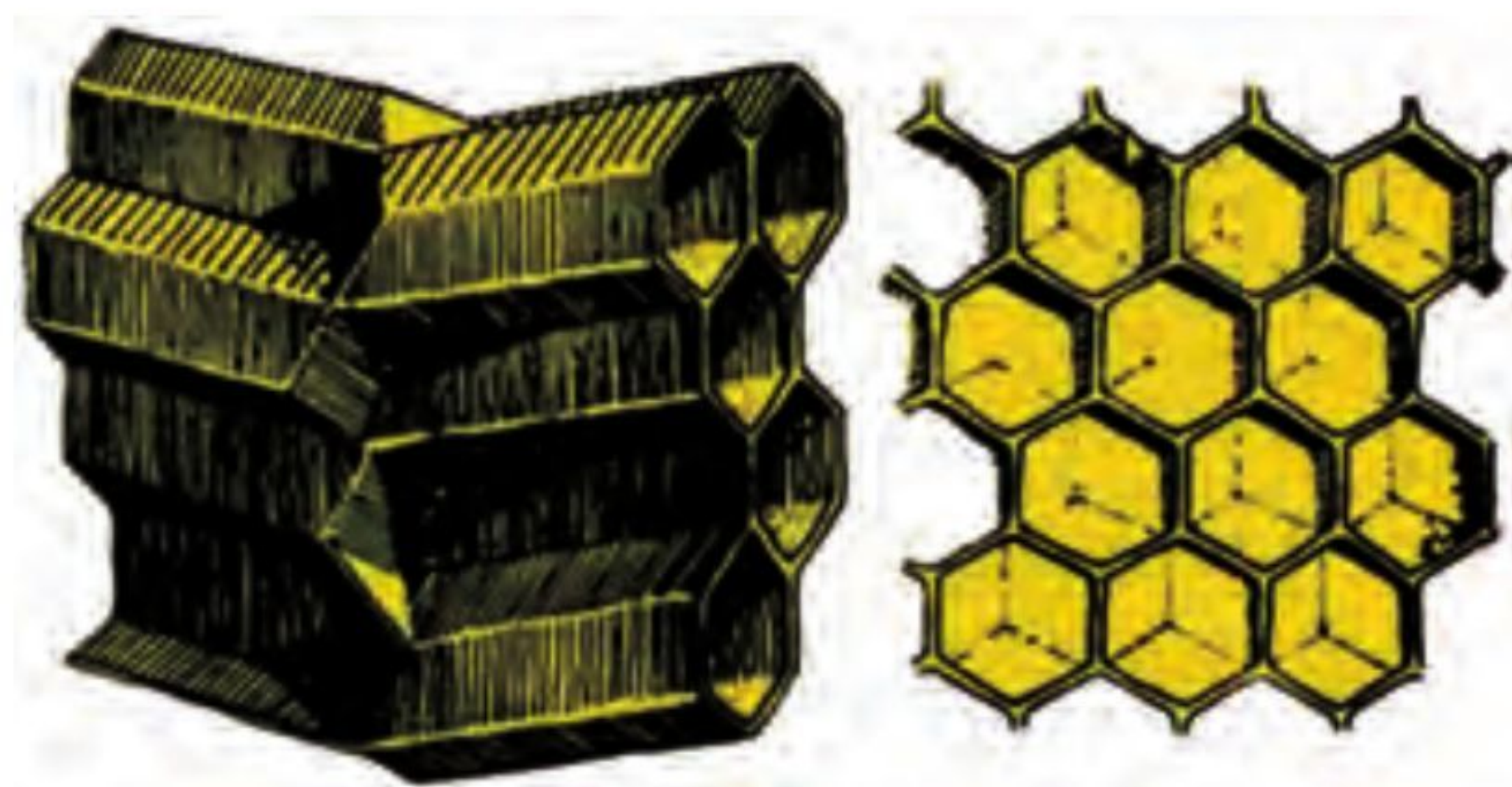


wax tubes around their bodies, and when these tubes were in proximity to lots of other tubes, surface tension would cause their wax, softened by the heat of the bees' bodies, to form all the tubes into hexagons. Like Archimedes, you can experience the eureka moment of this theory in the bath: make lots of soap bubbles on the surface of the water. They're circular. Now squeeze them together up against the side of the bath: squished, they will become hexagons. You are not a laser-guided genius, and the surface tension cannot help itself – you could probably achieve this, even by accident, and repeat it if you had a brain the size of a flake of wax. Applying Occam's razor, this explanation seems incisive.

Except that when bee scientists actually measured the temperature of combs during construction, it never rose high enough to soften the wax cells sufficiently for surface tension to deform them. And wasp lovers were quick to point out that wasps also build nests with perfectly hexagonal structures, but out of home-made paper which, as Ray Bradbury confirms in *Fahrenheit 451*, doesn't melt, however much you heat it.

We know that wasps start each hexagonal cell from a circular cup base, and then as they work the walls up, they seem to arrive at hexagons by just concentrating

on measuring the three-sided "Y" interconnections between touching cells – they may not even think in sixes. But wasps' nests are much smaller than bees' – some species of wasp can only maintain symmetry over rows of seven cells – and while all wasp combs are single-sided, honeycombs have two sides that mutually reinforce each other. Bees not only build thousands of cells that are fully hexagonal from the bottom up, but each of those bottoms forms part of the base of the comb built out in the opposite direction. To make the overall structure of the comb even stronger, the base of each cell shares the bases of three cells on the other side of the comb: through the bottom of every cell you can see a "Y" intersection of three of the opposite walls which add rigidity.



Honeycombs hang exactly vertical, and the cells on two sides are even sloped upwards to help stop valuables falling out. Honeybees all over our planet build combs like this without plans, without project managers, without any help from us, and we still don't fully know how.



The eight wax glands in honeybees' abdomens only function for as little as three days before the bees move up their career ladder to other specialist jobs. It can take hours for these glands to replenish after a wax delivery, but the average length of time the bees spend working at the honeycomb face to add their contribution is 30 seconds. They turn up, make an instant assessment of whatever stage of the construction they find at that moment, and know exactly how to move it forwards with their eight

flakes. This means that every bee knows how to build an entire comb structure from top to bottom, but individually none of them ever will – it can only happen through a hive-mind-bogglingly collaborative effort.

We have brains massively bigger than a speck of wax. And we have enhanced their function by digitally outsourcing information storage and processing. Our potential feels limited only by our imagination. But if we can't work together like the bees, the best intentions of all our structures may well be hexed. 🐝

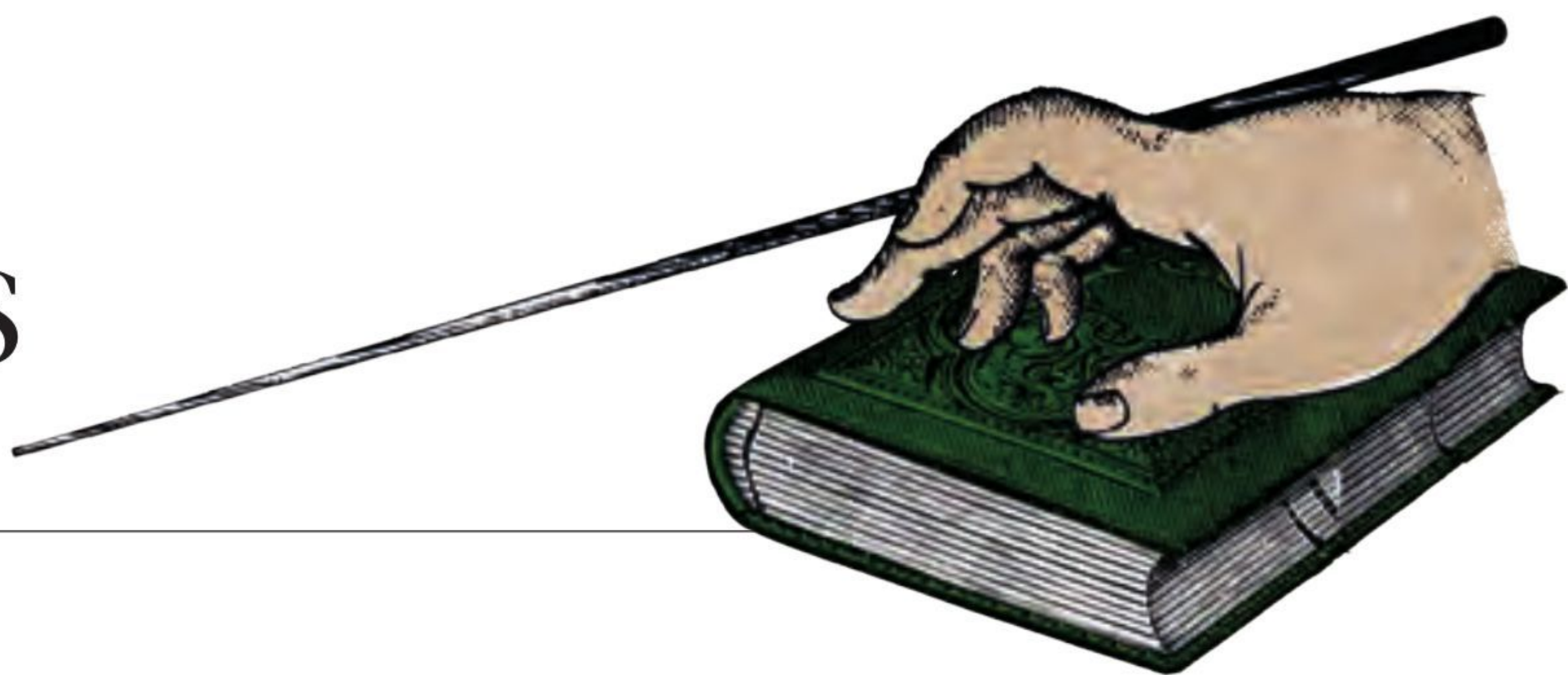




# Snooker

## Pocket books

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*Alex Johnson on the snooker writing that gets into his good books – and the odd miss*

**B**OOKS on football? Waterstones has shelves of them. Maybe a volume on cricket? No problem for Hatchards. A little something on golf? WH Smith would be happy to oblige. A cracking read about snooker? Er...

Snooker is used to being the slightly overlooked sport. That extends way beyond the media's inability to cover anything other than Ronnie saying something outrageous or banging on about John Virgo's impressions 40 years after he stopped doing them. So if you're looking for a fine read about snooker, what should you pick?

If you want something short and sharp (and often scabrous), turn to @snookerbacker on Twitter (or snookerbacker.com). For quirkier and newsier tweets, commentator and former pro Neal Foulds @fouldsy147 is definitely one to follow. For something more considered, try journalist Hector Nunn's blog inside-snooker.com.

As with most sporting bestsellers, the most conspicuous titles are "autobiographies" written by famous players and a journalist. Take your pick from Ronnie (who's also "written" two novels featuring a bit of snooker) all the way up to Graeme Dott. Hendry's *Me and the Table* is particularly good, and for comparison, anything by or about Alex Higgins but certainly *The Hurricane: The Turbulent Life and Times of Alex Higgins* by Bill Borrows is pretty eyebrow-raising.

I have enjoyed flicking through Penguin's 1937 *Billiards and Snooker for Amateur Players* by Horace Lindrum, which features players I've never heard of but has a winning special-hints section that includes advice on how to play a jump shot... *Advanced Snooker* by Joe Davis (1954) also has historical value as well as a section on the importance of concentration that wouldn't be out of place in a 21st-century book. A much more



modern take on the game is *On Snooker* by Mordecai Richler (2001), a look at the history of the sport plus chats with current players, agents and indeed groupies. The first quote Richler features is from Italian Archbishop Luigi Barbarito who, in 1989, advanced the theory that “playing snooker gives you firm hands and helps to build up character. It is an ideal recreation for nuns.”

For my money the finest piece of writing about snooker is *The Grudge Match* by Martin Amis and Julian Barnes. Before their relationship got a bit salty the two novelists used to meet regularly for a few frames and wrote about it in a short piece, which you can find in *The Esquire Book of Sports Writing*. Both discuss their nicknames, ludicrous in-offs and moderate highest career breaks, and it’s all written with considerable humour (Amis: “I do hit the ball tremendously hard and with several violent spins”; Barnes: “Most Humiliating Break: five balls for seven points including two flukes”). As a description of our own Wednesday Night Snooker Club it’s uncannily accurate.

When it comes to snooker in fiction, the cupboards really are bare. The only novel in which snooker is front and centre is Lionel Shriver’s *The Post-Birthday World*, a kind of *Sliding Doors/The Versions*

*of Us* approach featuring fictional snooker whizz Ramsey Acton – think a slightly less colourful Jimmy White. There are walk-on parts for John Higgins and more surprisingly John Parrott’s wife Karen, not forgetting Clive Everton, who’s described as an “urbane old-timer” and, rather less kindly, Dominic Dale (“a weedy, green young player”). Regular snooker players may grumble at some of the dialogue (“That shot was well prudent,” exclaims Dennis Taylor very improbably). Rather more accurately Ronnie features in both versions of the World Championship final.

Elsewhere Sam Millar’s crime novel *The Redemption Factory* is worth delving into. “I don’t think I could allow any woman to come between me and snooker,” says the protagonist. I also liked the fact that his snooker club is called The Tin Hut. Mine is called Raging Ball. Snooker plays a part, though a smaller one than its title might suggest, in *Beer In The Snooker Club* by Waguhi Ghali.

So, gentle reader with time on your hands, the Great Snooker Novel is still to be written... 🎱



## Sheds

# Man and super man cave

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*Alex Johnson takes a spin around George Bernard Shaw's revolving writing hut*

A WRITER'S room tends to be a sanctuary from domesticity and the excitements of children, pets and unwanted visitors. This is how George Bernard Shaw promoted his writing hut to the world, with himself as a creative hermit, tucked away in his modest retreat with only a few pens, a small table, a narrow bed and a wicker chair for comfort. His biographer Michael Holroyd described it as a kind of "monk's cell". The truth is a little more complicated ...

Shaw's refuge was a six-square-metre wooden summerhouse, originally intended for his wife Charlotte and inspired by the similar setup owned by his neighbour Apsley Cherry-Garrard, the naturalist who was part of Scott's expedition to the Antarctic, which he wrote up as *The Worst Journey In The World*. The hut was built on a revolving base that used castors on a circular track, essentially a shed on a lazy Susan.

This meant the hut, at his home in Ayot St Lawrence, Hertfordshire, could be moved to improve the light or change the view.

Spectacularly high-tech for its time, it also had an electric heater and a telephone connection to the house as well as an alarm clock to alert the Nobel Prize winner that it was lunchtime. Shaw enjoyed the isolation since it allowed his staff to tell callers that "Mr Shaw is out" to prevent interruptions. He also called it "London" for the same reason ("I'm sorry Sir, Mr Shaw is in London").

"Any place that will hold a bed and a writing table is as characteristic of me as any other," Shaw said in an interview for the *World* magazine in July 1900. But this apparent indifference to his writing space belies the way in which he used the hut as a real-life stage to promote his ideas and beliefs.

As a journalist – as well as a





Spin factory: GBS's modest writing shed and its cunning Lazy Susan revolving base.





Capital idea: GBS nicknamed his shed "London" so that staff could tell anyone who came calling that's where he was



playwright and prolific writer – Shaw had a keen appreciation of the power of photography within mass media, and kept cuttings of his press appearances. He was certainly not a monk in terms of worldliness. A friend of US press baron William Randolph Hearst, Shaw ensured that glimpses of his life were stage managed to create a specific impression, playing on his reputation as a media celebrity at a time when there was growing interest in the private lives of famous people.

It was also a time when there was growing appreciation of idyllic rural settings. Shaw made the most of this movement, promoting himself as a reclusive thinker toiling in his rustic shelter, away from the intrusions of press and people alike, while at the same time inviting in newspapers and magazines and posing for photos.

Thus, in August 1929, Shaw stood in front of his hut for a photo for *Modern Mechanics & Inventions* magazine to promote the idea of sunlight as a healing agent (the dramatic postures he effected for these shots were also in line with his interest in eurhythmics, the concept of developing one's sense of rhythm through movement). He also had windows installed that were made from Vitaglass, a recent invention that allowed UV rays to come through, letting, the makers

said, “health into the building”. His very ownership of a hut with a turntable, placed him in the vanguard of medical thought, since rotating summerhouses were used to treat people suffering from tuberculosis.

However, not all of Shaw's great outdoors campaigns featured in press photographs; although a supporter of nudism, he always publicised the hut fully clothed.

Of course he showed off his shed to his celebrity friends. In spring 1944 when the actress Vivien Leigh was shooting a movie version of Shaw's play *Caesar & Cleopatra*, she and flamboyant director Gabriel Pascal and were taken to see the writing hut, where studio photographer Wilfrid Newton took promotional pictures of the meeting. There's also footage of comedian and actor Danny Kaye visiting Shaw. Shaw's house and garden – where he and his wife's ashes were scattered – are now a National Trust property, so you can visit the famous writing hut for yourself. 📷

[nationaltrust.org.uk/shaws-corner](https://nationaltrust.org.uk/shaws-corner)



# Eating out

## Lockdown luxury

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*Victoria Hull enjoys a delicate feast from one of London's top-rated restaurants*

THERE are just a few high-end London restaurants that pivoted quickly to takeaway at the beginning of lockdown and they all have four-letter names: Roka, Coya, Brat and Hide. Hide is the restaurant I've been fantasising about because of its Michelin star and fabulous oak interior levels looking over Green Park. At the beginning of lockdown, Hide quickly sourced eco takeaway packaging, persuaded their front of house to become delivery drivers and scoured town for cars. "You need to adapt to survive," executive chef Ollie Dabbous says.

I speak to Dabbous on his day off, which he has chosen to spend... well... cooking. He's baking bread and other treats for his isolating parents. His small children are at home but he gives no hint of juggle and chaos. This is a young man who makes complicated seem simple and his food is the same. He says Hide's kitchen adapted well to

a pared-down staff. With four stations circled around a central rotisserie, chefs can distance easily. Without kitchen porters there are far fewer staff in the kitchen – normally 20, now six. Hide have kept two teams of six, four days on, four days off, plus eight staff moderating the home delivery and nine drivers. He looked into using a delivery company but the commission didn't make sense and this way they keep more staff in work.

In normal times Hide serves tiny snacks skewered on feathers, and extravagances like raw blue-fin tuna with prickly ash, Exmoor caviar and burnt liquorice root marshmallow. Dabbous's idea for Hide At Home is to offer a window of luxury and indulgence to London's lockdowners, not recreating his most avant-garde and minimalist dishes but offering a homely treat "with no washing up". He can source ingredients that would be difficult





Tycoon's takeaway: linguine with crab from London's Hide

for the rest of us to get hold of – the best fish and the freshest fruit and vegetables. Lobster and chips fly out. Dabbous says the takeaway offering is not over-finessed but “better than home cooking”. He says he has to “let go a bit. The food isn’t going to be exactly as I’d want

it to be.” We expect a little bit of a twist and an original touch but “It’s comfort food. It’s about small luxuries but it’s not fussy. And it can survive the journey.”

I find the menu online and email my choice to the Hide At Home team. I get a call back from a



charming young man who turns out to be Dabbous's partner, the bar manager famous in his own realm, Oskar Kinsberg. Together they have previously launched two acclaimed restaurants, Michelin-starred Dabbous in Fitzrovia and Barnyard in Soho before being persuaded by Russian Telecoms billionaire Yevgeny Chichvarkin to close and launch Hide with him. It was clearly an offer too good to miss. I ask Oskar how he feels moving into delivery management. "At least I have a job," he says. "We're lucky. We have strong backers who have been through the good times and the bad."

The big event arrives with a young man in a Zip car unpacking an extravagance of brown paper bags onto our doorstep. There's fluster at home. We rush a cloth onto the table and teenagers disgorge the brown bags. There's an array of sauces in little pots and as the youth tuck in it's a bit late to work out what goes with what. An unctuous soy sauce may have been meant for the tender Iberico pork but it's too late to know. Chunky slices of brioche toast are surely for the liver parfait. There are some tiny crispy balls of something. "I like these," someone says. "I don't know what they are but they're my second favourite after the tempura." It's weird eating food when you don't know what it is or what's in it,

that you haven't made yourself.

Wafer slices of goose ham are extraordinary, the pork tasty even without sauce, the poussin is tender and dark. This is produce on another level from our weekly supermarket shop. Artichoke salad with butter beans is heaven, walnut bread is still warm, and a light, clean oil glosses a side salad. If only I could achieve purple broccoli like this – crisp, charred, lightly dressed. There's a dish of potato cake gratin that must have taken unfeasibly long to make – thin slices of potatoes first fried in butter, then pressed in the fridge and finally deep fried. It comes in wedges which the teenagers eat in their fingers "like the poshest chip ever". Linguine, yellow with egg, is smeared with crab and oil and slivers of fresh chilli.

Strawberry tart is sprinkled with petals, its *pâte sucrée* biscuity, custard light and *coulis* bright. There's a pot of strawberry jammy sauce that we think would have gone with the tart. "They'd have done blobbing on the plate," says a teenager. Rum baba comes topped with the darkest, sweetest candied cherry, whipped cream and a hint of orange, its rum sauce thirst-quenchingly light. The word we want to use to describe every dish is delicate.

There's been fantastic demand for Hide At Home: lots of regulars



and lots of birthdays. “We had to buy in a lot of candles. It’s the only thing that comes close to the escapism of a restaurant experience,” Dabbous says. It’s certainly not cheap but for a birthday treat it’s worth it. And you can reuse the eco containers.

Hide is breaking even and watching closely as other countries come out of lockdown. They envisage opening with 30 per cent covers, tables spread out, possibly with screens between them, and possibly with waiters serving to a distanced table. Hide At Home will continue alongside. And in between Ollie cooks 200 meals a week for staff at St Barts hospital. “We can do it,” he says. “The staff are in the kitchen. Some suppliers offer stock for free.” Nurses and doctors enjoy homely offerings like grain salad and roast carrots with feta, beef stew and dumplings, sticky toffee pudding – “just a bit nicer than what they’re used to.”

I can guarantee it would be a lot nicer than what my family are used to as well.

Hide At Home is beyond expensive for a takeaway but a fabulous lockdown treat you won’t regret.

1 goose charcuterie  
1 soft-shell crab  
1 crab pasta main  
1 poussin  
1 crispy potato cake  
1 broccoli

Cost £147

Hide threw in

1 bread and butter  
1 green olives  
1 liver parfait  
2 rum baba  
1 lychee sherbet  
1 Iberico pork

It fed five and there were leftovers. 🍷

Hide At Home

Delivery 11.30am to 10pm every day  
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hide.co.uk

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## Easy money

# Save it for a rainy day

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*The importance of a nest egg and how to create one, by the*  
**Seven Pound Millionaire**

MANY of us treat having an emergency fund no more seriously than that solitary stale fag stuck in its fake glass bell jar with “In case of emergency” emblazoned across the front. I suspect we’ve all carried a tenner in our shoe on a night out or hidden a spare credit card in our washbag on holiday more often than we’ve calculated what we would actually need “in case of emergency”, let alone actually set such a sum aside.

This might not be the case in the near future. Recent events have been the first taste of a real crisis for many, and we should recognise that having more than a few spare quid in the biscuit tin, or a roll of notes in the frozen peas if we’re really lucky, would be extremely handy.

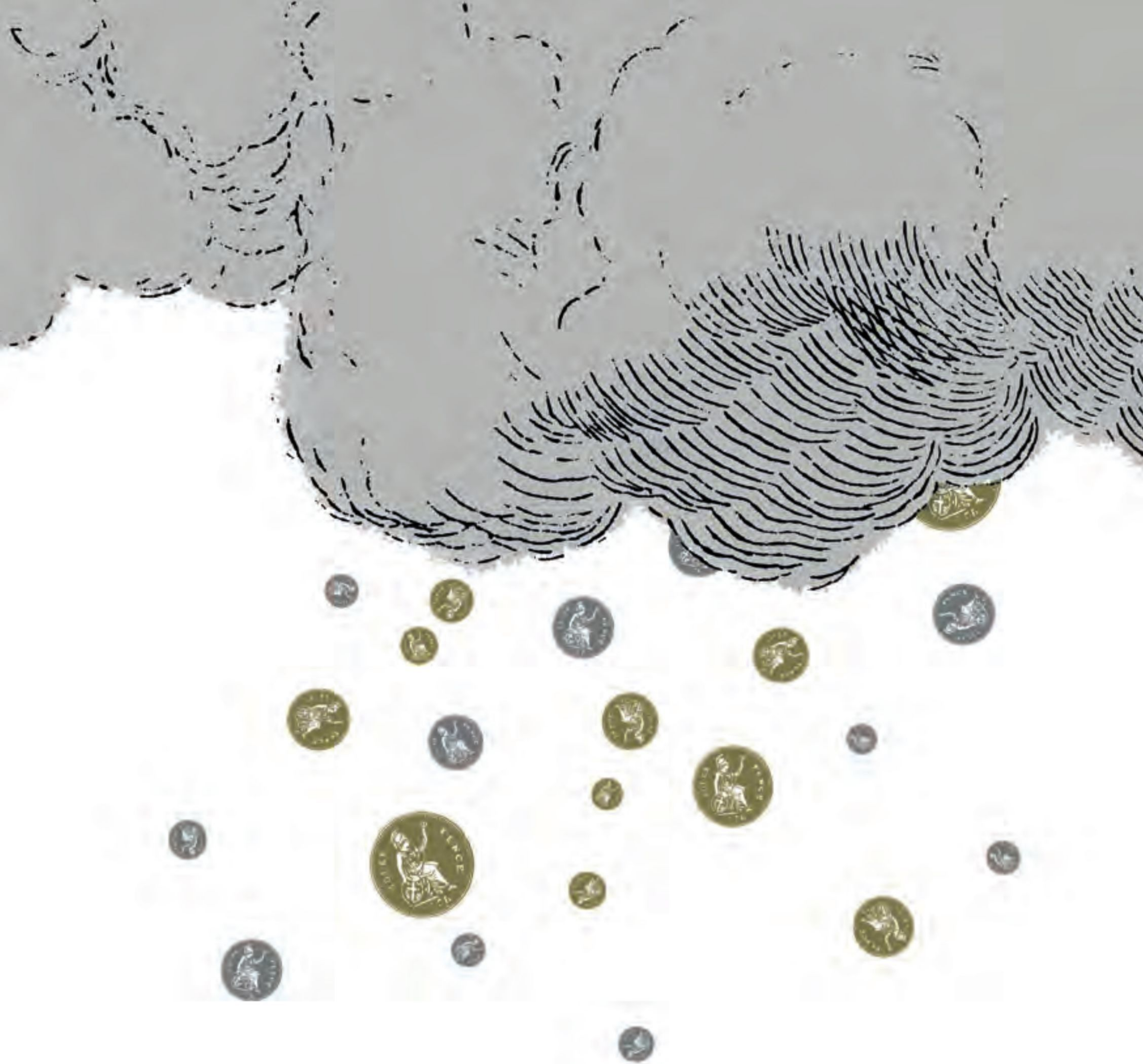
Unusually for financial matters, having a lack of emergency funds is an issue that affects people at every income level. All the way up the economic ladder, the subject is virtually ignored.

Of the three reasons usually put forward for not having a sufficient emergency fund, two are unsound and the other is only slightly better. Let’s start with the latter. If you really can’t afford it, then fair enough. But only if you *really*, *really* can’t – because if there’s one thing you should try to avoid, it’s having to borrow money at exorbitant rates in an emergency. I saw this first-hand while doing voluntary work with low-paid migrants. Understanding what an emergency can do to you is a strong motivation for having some kind of financial safety-net in place.

Ignorance of the need for an emergency fund is another often-used reason given for not saving, but if some good can come out of this recent crisis it will be that more people will expect another one to happen and will prepare for it.

You should save between £210 and 25% of your monthly income. £210 is £7 a day.





And this is where I get my *soubriquet*. The calculation goes: to be a millionaire at retirement, you would need to save a minimum of £7 a day for fifty years, assuming an interest rate of 7%.

You will now get a grand in the bank in less than five months. It is enough to get you going from a standing start, and creating that habit alone would be a positive

change. 25% of your income will be harder, but that's your eventual goal for lifetime savings, so while we're training a new behaviour, we could aim for it.

The third reason – and the one that's most common among those who do have enough income to save – is the gearing created by taking on too much mortgage for your income or house value.



People in this category have usually tried to jump a little too high on the housing ladder. This is a tricky one, as property prices can rise at such speed that getting a big mortgage can feel like the only answer. But there's a lot to be said for buying what you can afford, and you can't afford not to have an emergency fund.

So how big should that fund be? The standard advice is three to six months of spending. One useful aspect of lockdown is that it's given us a good way to gauge what our actual monthly emergency spending would be, since it has meant not going to the pub, eating out or going on holiday. Look at your cheapest coronavirus month and multiply that by at least three.

Once done, this is the only part of your investment you really need to keep in low-risk, easy access asset classes like near-cash and savings accounts, enabling the rest of your portfolio of investments, if any, to be significantly higher risk, because you now have emergencies properly covered.

An alternative might be to follow the lead of those Domesday survivalists: stockpile the dried beans, buy a camouflage jacket and keep some of your emergency fund in gold and silver coins. While gold is a better store of value than silver, and has the advantage of spiking in value during inflationary

times, preppers like silver for its lower denominations, making it more likely to be accepted in whatever's left of the farm shop after the apocalypse.

The real trade-off decision to make around gold and silver should be security versus transaction costs, as three months' spending is a lot of money to keep at home. More esoteric coins tend to cost more to trade, which means you could lose five to 10 per cent when you need to cash them in, if they haven't gone up in price, while more boring vacuum-packed mini-ingots can be a lot cheaper and safer in the bullion company's vault. Of course, encouraging your kids to think you might actually be a pirate by keeping a small bag of sovereigns tucked away somewhere can easily sway that decision.

We should learn from survivalists that these funds are to be used only when things hit the fan, which they love to say as though willing it to happen. Of course, in such an extreme scenario, cigarettes will become a *de facto* currency, so you might want more than just the one stale fag in your fake bell jar, but only in case of a real emergency. 🚬

*The Seven Pound Millionaire is a fund manager who moonlights as a financial literacy coach and advocate. What could be more idle than getting our money to work for us?*



# Philosophy

## Your money's worth

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Mark Vernon *on the troubling ascent of Mammon*

I REMEMBER the day my pocket money first went up. We lived in Germany and so I received the cash in Deutsche marks. I needed an increase because my comics had become more expensive, and to cover the cost of Saturday matinées at the cinema, which I was now old enough to go to on my own. The amount I received each week rose from two to five marks. I recall the increase not because I clocked that this was a whopping 250 per cent rise. Rather, it was because a five-mark piece weighed very much more than a two-mark coin. I could feel the changed presence in my pocket. It pulled down in a reassuring way. I wasn't just a bit better off: I felt richer. I suspect having more money made me walk a bit taller, stand a bit straighter, feel a bit more part of the world. It boosted my vitality and my agency. I'd not just got more money but, seemingly, more life. This is what money can do. It's magic.

And that raises a question: how

can it be that a mass-produced zinc and nickel disc has such an effect? I've come to think that the best answer arrives when you assume money is not a token of worth, not a way of paying for things, not even a promise of new pleasures. It's when you assume it is alive and has a philosophy.

Money is active. It has a way of looking at the world, engaging with life, offering insights. And it knows how to pass that spirit on. It offers hopes quite as powerful as any other on offer these days – human rights, national sovereignty, personal fulfilment. Actually, I think it's more powerful. All these ideals have an impact on our lives. They help forge our experience. But none does so to quite the extent that money does.

In the last few centuries it has seized control of our world in a way that's nothing short of revolutionary. Today, it's in charge. It rules and shapes everything. So it's worth asking what this philosophy does.



The story is told in a new book. *The Enchantments of Mammon* by Eugene McCarraher (Belknap Press) is a compelling account of how money rebelled from the subordinate role it was allotted in the medieval world and before. It had been kept in check by taboos against usury and its link to real things like gold. Alternatively, the goal was to raise money for something, perhaps to build a cathedral or fight a war. There's the story of the ancient Greek philosopher, Thales, who learnt to predict the weather. He wanted to demonstrate confidence in his method and so bought the rights to all the olive presses in the region. He took a risk with his money and was proven right: there was a bumper crop of olives the next year. He made a fortune. But his point was to prove his learning, not make money for money's sake.

That's changed, and Mammon's strategy of escape is arresting. It's to enchant the world with its Midas touch. Marx and Engels had argued that money desecrates the world by turning everything into property with a cash value that can then be parcelled up, traded and owned. "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned," they wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*.

Well, that's not right, McCarraher presses. The truth is almost the opposite: the god Mammon has

made everything apparently solid and holy because he's persuaded us that he can give everything a monetary value and so a place in our lives. He can feed the five thousand, bring sight to the blind, even on occasion raise the dead. He administers insurance, worth, blessings.

But there's a non-pecuniary price we pay. One of the earliest modern writers to name it was the poet John Milton. In *Paradise Lost*, he assumes Mammon is alive, too, and that he has a philosophy of life. Mammon is a spiritual being, he says, one of the fallen angels.

Different fallen angels have different philosophies. Satan's is rule. "It is better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven," he famously remarks. Mammon's is possession. It's precisely the opposite of God's philosophy, which is gift. Mammon wants to convince you that everything in life must be owned, worked for, secured, paid for. There's no such thing as a free lunch. Plus, Milton adds, only the material world is really desirable and spiritual goods don't exist.

It's a kind of deep materialism. Mammon makes you think his life brings more life the more you own. This is why my pocket money raise made me walk taller and stand straighter. I was the same person as the day before but I felt I had more; was more. Similarly, Mammon's is



a world in which brands can be worth more than products and the virtual economy of city traders worth many times more than the real economy.

It's given us the world of celebrities and credit. But these "blessings" cost. Milton argues that Mammon's activity perverts life. He turns the delight of discovery into the desire for profit. It twists the joys of wonder into the compulsion to manipulate. He tells you that what matters to Mannonnites in life is scarce – stuff, security, time – while simultaneously blinding you to what's abundant – beauty, attention, love.

Even when he was in Heaven, Milton writes, Mammon looked downward, "admiring more / The riches of Heaven's pavement – trodden gold – / Than aught divine or holy".

Mammon has now made his heaven on earth, though I wonder whether he might be asking whether, these days, he's got a bit out of control. Did he ever think we would worship him? Did he

anticipate that we would want money for money's sake and that there would be people alive who had so much wealth that they couldn't spend it if they tried?

He's had a runaway success. His philosophy shapes the entire economy around the goals of growth for growth's sake and accumulation. Little wonder the planet is beginning to complain and fight back.

McCarraher's book also tracks those thinkers who have tried to resist the takeover. Alongside Milton, he mentions figures like John Ruskin and William Blake, as well as uprisings like the Arts and Crafts movement and the anarchists.

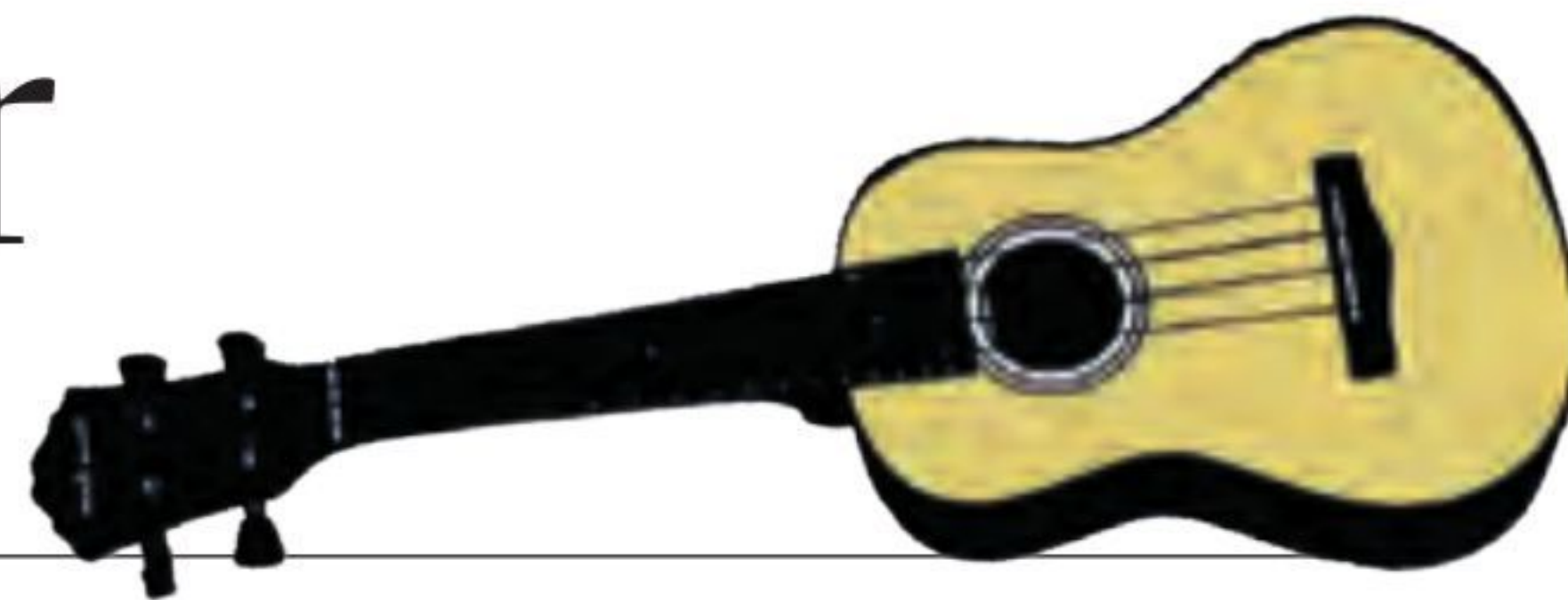
Such names appear not infrequently on the pages of the *Idler*. We need them. They can remind us of the possibility of a world not wholly shaped by Mammon. But we also need to become more conscious of his philosophy. This fallen angel might then hide less easily in plain sight. 🕒





# Ukulele

## Daydream believer



Cameron Murray *speaks to uke queen Taimane Gardner and finds out why idling is so important to her*

CHILD prodigies and ukuleles go together like tea and biscuits, which isn't too surprising when you consider the size of both. A soprano uke can seem quite ridiculous in the hands of a large man, but looks just right on a 10-year-old.

One of the most amazing talents to graduate from wowing relatives at parties to performing on stages around the globe is 31-year-old Taimane Gardner.

"Ukulele is my first love," says the native Hawaiian. "I've been playing the uke since I was five, so I'm very comfortable with it and I can express through it as if it were a part of me."

Taimane started competing in ukulele contests when she was six, but her big break came while busking on the streets of Waikiki. Legendary Hawaiian entertainer Don Ho, best known for the 1966 hit *Tiny Bubbles*, saw something in the precocious teenager and invited

her to join his twice-weekly variety show.

"It was a beautiful and very different experience compared to playing on the streets," she says. "At Don's you had a captive audience ready to listen to your every note. Don was a great mentor. He taught me how to connect with an audience through eye contact, song selection and telling jokes."

After honing her skills and learning some impressive flamenco techniques from fellow uke star Jake Shimabukuro, Taimane went solo, releasing her first album *Loco Princess* in 2005. She's since opened for the likes of Chicago, Chris Isaak and Jimmy Buffett, and is well known for her intense and immersive live shows.

"I enjoy putting an image to my music and creating an experience for the audience members," she explains. "I like to call it visual music. It makes the performance more fun and meaningful to have a





Flower power: Taimane in action

theme and storyline and to watch the songs come alive with dancers, costume and the collaboration of the artists to create an experience together for the love of art.”

While Taimane can give off a somewhat ethereal air, like all successful people she’s also pragmatic when she needs to be.

“No matter what you choose to do, it requires passion and a work ethic to stay successful,” she says. “I also don’t limit myself to only doing what I want to. I need to pay my bills and so will take on gigs, such as private parties and birthdays, that help keep me afloat while also being connected to what I’m passionate about.

“Find a productive routine that works for you. For me, I use the mornings for getting work emails done, then I eat lunch and switch to music. Success is doing what you love in balance with your body and wellbeing. I’m still exploring what that means as I grow older – how many shows to do before I start

feeling exhausted and my body begins to hurt. Maintaining my mental and physical health will keep that passion and motivation burning for me. I just need to make sure I listen!”

And, of course, set aside plenty of time for doing nothing at all ...

“Idling to me is taking time for yourself and thinking about other things besides work completely,” Taimane says. “I did this yesterday: I woke up naturally, no alarm clock, watched as many movies as I wanted, ate whatever I wanted and had no social obligations. I didn’t look at work emails or start working on any music. Today I feel refreshed and am ready to work on anything with a newfound energy. If I don’t take the time to idle or daydream, I feel uptight, stressed and snappy! It’s imperative to keep myself, and in turn my music and performances, positive and refreshed.” 🎧

*taimane.com*



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# Idle pets

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Marnie

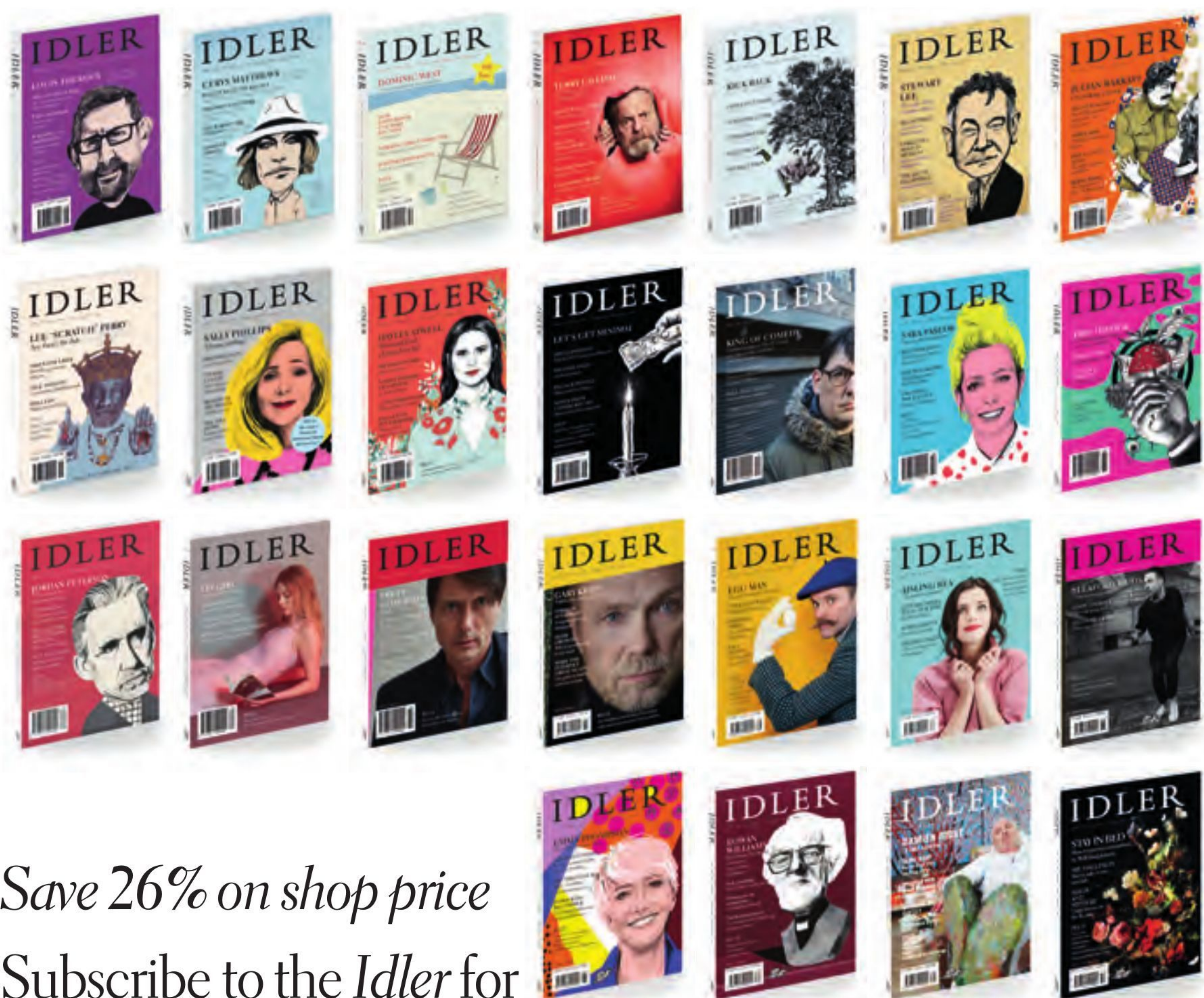
Owner: Theo Bartlett

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